Planet MUKURO

SpiritNo.6
AstralDress-ZodiacType　Weapon-KeyType[Michael]

橘公司

The author
Koushi Tachibana

14

六喰プラネット

デート・ア・ライブ

DATE A LIVE

精霊
異界に存在する特殊災害指定生命体。発生原因、存在理由ともに不明。
こちらの世界に現れる際、空間震を発生させ、周囲に甚大な被害を及ぼす。
また、その戦闘能力は強大。
対処法1
武力を以てこれを殲滅する。
ただし前述の通り、非常に高い戦闘能力を持つため、達成は困難。
対処法2
――デートして、デレさせる。
六喰プラネット

デート・ア・ライブ 14 六喰プラネット

DATE A LIVE Planet MUKURO

精霊 ― 夜刀神十香
高校生 ― 五河士道
精霊 ― 本折紙
精霊 ― 八舞耶倶矢
精霊 ― 八舞夕弦

「この星の巡りを、《封解主》で止めてくれよう」
第10の精霊——星宮六喰

「エレン。呼び出したよ。行こう」
魔術師――アルテミシア・B・アシュクロフト
「わかっています」
最強の魔術師――エレン・M・イザーク

「あの……お婆さん。私そろそろ行かないと」
精霊――四糸乃
「これじゃまるで、『マッチ売りの少女』よね」
〈ラタトスク〉司令官――五河琴里
「このガラスの靴。綺麗でしょう？」
精霊――七罪
「きゃー!?
な、なんですかここー！」
精霊――美九

「えっへっへ、間二髪だったねぇ、少年」

精霊――二亜（にあ）

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Prologue: Awakening of the Stars

Even though it was the sky, it wasn’t exactly the sky.

Even though it was the world, it was an unworldly place.

In the midst of the dark place, a girl was floating adrift.

Just like a block of stone.

Just like a speck of dust.

Just like a scrap of dirt.

The girl was just simply "being there".

She had already became a part of nature, and a portion of the world. Irresistible and irreversible, without any interference or intervention. Only within the peace of nothingness, did she continue to float around.

There were none who could see her appearance, hence none had heard her voice.

No————Even those who knew about her presence heretofore don’t even exist in this world anymore.

However, she could never remember herself being dissatisfied with it.

Even slight loneliness. Even a little hesitation. Even a shred of irritation.

No. Not only that.

Even the feeling of delight. Even the feeling of happiness. ——Even the feeling of longing for someone.

Not even one of those——had her closed heart had ever embraced.

However, it’s better this way. It's the quietness and tranquility she hopes for.

——But.

That day, uninvited guests appeared before her eyes.

They looked like a huge lumps of iron. They were distorted humanoids with very long limbs.

With that strange form, they had trespassed on her territory.

She did not even interfere with anything.

However, at the time, the things trespassed and in order to eliminate them; she had to leave a part of her heart.

Just how long had it been?

The girl——had opened her eyes.

"……Fumun?"

With a light cough, she stretched her body which had been curled up. She raised a small groan since her bones and flesh had not been working for a long time.

".....Oh? I thought what kind of person woke Muku up, but it is a herd of strange-looking things, huh."

The girl set forth her hand, made a small cough of a "name", and took a huge "key" in her hand.

Then, she turned its tip to the huge silhouettes.

"——You're an eyesore, better you begone."

That day.

The worst natural disaster for the Earth had awakened.

Chapter 1 - First Shrine Visit of the Year

Legends tell that the amount of money you offer into a *saisen*-box doesn't seem to correlate with fortune. Although simply throwing a 5-yen coin can bring about good luck. [1]

However, tossing in six of those could lead to an ungratified destiny - thus is the meaning behind that myth. The 500-yen coin, having the highest nominal value, is meaningless to offer, carrying an excessive hundredfold of the original value. [2]

Well, the impartial gods wouldn't judge someone based on how much he or she offered, so anyone proffering a ¥10 000 note in exchange for a beneficial omen or prognostication would likewise end up with unfulfilled wishes.

Nevertheless, Shidou, being a senior high school student, hadn't the slightest notion of putting forth such a huge sum of money. Frankly, he was grateful for the deities' benevolence and paid his respects by throwing in a 5-yen coin and ringing the bell that gave a clank-like sound.

".....”

He closed his eyes and made a wish.

Actually, for the almighty divinities situated inside the temple to grant worshippers their aspirations, such a possibility was not to be considered. Although there are 8 million deities that originate from Japan, it assigns people to gather the various wishes of worshippers onto a single deity's domain, this cruel legend.

However, Shidou did not bother to mull over the significance behind praying.

Aspirations, demands, and aims are things that everyone possesses. Such vivid circumstances also arise in everyday life.

Naturally, examinees and girls in love often portray their own wishes, but these kinds of people ought to live in happiness. Very few people who find themselves in turmoil and confronting adversity will ponder over their problems. Healthy people will unlikely be inclined to depend on themselves and those with wealth will not prefer to scrape a meager living with such aspirations.

Even though these are all extreme instances, everyone has their own subconscious bliss, therefore Shidou earnestly hoped.

The joy you feel now can last forever.

“...Phew”

Shidou gently exhaled and opened his eyes. Observing either of his sides, Shidou glanced at the girls who were praying in suit. Tohka stood to his right while Origami, Kaguya, and Yuzuru where to his left.

Everyone there attended Raizen High School and they are all also Spirits who had been previously sealed by Shidou. Resplendent kimonos which gleamed under the sun decorated the attires of said devotes. They, together with Shidou, prayed for a rather long period of time, unknown of what each other were actually praying for.

“Un.”

As he wondered about that enigma, beside him Tohka unraveled her dark crystalline eyes. Her bundle of long black hair, the color of the night, which glistened beneath the sunshine was softly brushed aside her cheeks.

“Oh, have you waited for long, Shidou?”

“It's alright. What did you wish for?”

“Umu, I want to eat a lot of delicious food this year!”

“Haha, that's true,”

It was indeed a Tohka-like wish. Faced with such thoughts Shidou couldn't help but to think over tonight's menu. However, Tohka continued.

“And one more wish.”

“Yeah?”

“I hope I can stay together with Shidou and everyone else forever.”

Tohka said that while emanating a sunny smile. Shidou momentarily widened his eyes.

“Aah, that's right” he giggled and nodded.

As if in tandem, the Yamai sisters - Kaguya and Yuzuru - shifted towards Shidou after completing their worship.

“Oh, what did you all wish for?”

As Shidou asked, Kaguya, who wore a kimono with alternating colors of orange and black, made a commanding gesture with her hand.

“Wish? Kuku… and I thought thou implied otherwise. To conquer this miniscule plot of land to the extent of a deity's prowess was something I sought for long ago. Nevertheless, whosoever remains under my awe forsooth tremble and shudder.”

“Disclosure. Lies, Kaguya undoubtedly whispered, ‘I hope to ascend the stairs of adolescence this year, just now.”

“Could you stop saying that in a serious-like tone?! I obviously vocalized my desire to impart on a date with Shidou——”

Without finishing, Kaguya responded with a slight tremor on her shoulders.

Shidou scratched his now blushing cheek, having heard his name being mentioned, and stirred away from their line of sight.

“No uhh… I’ll consider that.”

“ ..... ! “

Seeing Kaguya’s face redden, Yuzuru smirked, “Smile. That'd be great.”

“Ahhh… really…”

The now teary-eyed Kaguya began to playfully pound Yuzuru’s back.

“Withdrawal. It hurts... Kaguya.”

“Hey now, don't trouble someone else.”

Shidou forced a grin and stopped the pair.

Their current location was a shrine in the vicinity of the Itsuka household. Although it was still the 4th of January, the liveliness and excitement over the last three days had somewhat died down. Nonetheless, several people could still be seen here and there visiting the shrine. Kaguya also noticed her face regaining its color after regulating her breathing.

“...Ok. Me thinks my composure hast returned. I need not remind thee that I possess dark magical recoverability.”

“Sure you do. Well then, let’s get going.”

As everyone started to leave the shrine, Shidou noticed that there was still one more girl standing in prayer with palms held together before the shrine.

A girl dressed in a pure white kimono adorned with paper crane motifs - Origami was still piously praying and muttering incantations.

“Origami?”

“Time is truly everlasting. What did thou pray for?” Kaguya curiously approached Origami and leaned closer to her ear.

“ ….. ! “

The nearing Kaguya caught wind of Origami’s words and her previously flushed face instantly turned even more flushed with a surge of blood rushing to her cheeks, retreating afterwards at full speed.

“Ka-Kaguya?”

“Muuu.. what did Origami say?”

Tohka decided to walk over to the person in question with a perplexed expression.

Kaguya panicky rushed over to prevent any loss of innocence.

“Wait! You can't! It's too early for Tohka!”

“Muu…..?”

“J-just what in the world did you wish for, Origami.”

Seeing Kaguya all panic-stricken, Shidou took a deep breath and wiped his perspiration. At that time, Origami advanced towards them.

“Are you done, Origami?”

“.....”

As if in response to Shidou’s question, Origami remained silent and rubbed her belly before giving Shidou a thumbs up.

“Preparations complete.”

“For what?!”

As Shidou lamented with a hand on his forehead, he exhaled.

“Anyway, there are people queuing. Let's go.”

The Spirits all agreed and Shidou apologized to the other worshippers waiting behind them for the ruckus they created. They turned back and left the *saisen*-box.

After reaching a sparser area they observed their surroundings.

“Uuh, I wonder where did Kotori and the others go.....?”

Not long after, Shidou spotted the figure of his sister Kotori. Although they had originally planned to visit the shrine together, due to the limited size of the *saisen*-box, the number of people allowed was fixed. As a result, they had no other choice but to split up.

“Hey Onii-chan~~~.”

A familiar voice called out from behind. And as though his imagination realized, Kotori and the others appeared with something enthralling in hand. Beside him, Tohka shook her head with uncertainty.

“Muu? Kotori? What are you guys doing?” This was also futile, however.

Where Kotori stood lay a long conference table. The Spirits who came to revere, with pens in hands, seemed to be scribbling something.

“Hmm.”

Currently equipped with her white ribbons, Kotori was wearing a fiery red kimono and picked up the wooden cuboids beside her hands. The topmost punctured part was used to hoist said miniature planks with a knot.

“Ooh what's this?”

“It's a wishing plaque. If you write your wishes on it, they will come true.” [3]

“What! Really?!”

Tohka’s eyes emitted a glimmering shine.

“First the star festival, then the prayers just now, and now this - I didn't know so many methods existed to materialize wishes, life's good!”

“Ahaha… well, even though they may not really come true, don't expect much,”

Shidou replied back with a grin.

“Umu, I know, Mr. God has his work cut out for him.”

Tohka wriggled with enthusiasm, her eyes fixed on Shidou’s. Looking over to the Yamai sisters, Shidou noticed that their expressions were similar to Tohka’s.

“Since this is a rare opportunity, let's all give it a try.”

Shidou made a wry smile.

“Yay!”

The Spirits all gave out a collective cheer.

Elated to such a degree, Shidou didn't want to ruin the mood thus he obtained wooden wishing plaques for everybody.

“Let's move to a quieter place to write.”

“Umu.”

Tohka and the others picked up the pens provided on the table. Shidou too did the same, yet he turned towards the group of Spirits that had already been writing theirs.

“That's very nice, Yoshino.”

Shidou peered into Yoshino’s plaque, and espied a cutely drawn rabbit wearing an eye-patch on the right half of the plaque.

“T-Thank you very much.....”

Yoshino’s cheeks turning a bright shade of red due to her bashfulness. Today, her apparel consisted of a light emerald green kimono, in addition to elegantly tied hair. It looked as if she was a bit more mature than usual.

Ufufu, don't you agree? Shidou-kun sure knows it.”

Incidentally, the puppet fixated on Yoshino’s left hand began to move its mouth. Its cotton outfit resembled that of Yoshino’s kimono, and its appearance was no different from the picture drawn on her plaque.

Aah, it isn't a big deal. With this such a cute plaque, even the gods would fancy it.”

Hearing Shidou’s words, Yoshino couldn't help but giggle, albeit very softly.

“Ah… but Natsumi-san’s and Nia-san’s wishing plaques are also… wonderful.”

Yoshino pointed towards that direction as she observed.

“Eh?”

Shidou gazed in astonishment.

A short distance away from the group, two girls were composing something on their wishing plaques together. However, the ambience which encircled them was entirely different.

The petite girl in a dark green kimono and the girl covered in a down-filled coat wearing glasses were in the process of applying distinct colors in drawing lovely personifications of schoolgirls. In fact, there was nothing bewildering about this activity alone; however, the pair, rather than being regular visitors to the shrine, resembled more to professional *mangaka*s rushing manuscripts just before an impending deadline. [4]

Moreover, their drawings have superseded even expert standards. Rumors say that one of them is really a professional. They'd unavoidably attract attention.

"Hey - the both of you."

Only after perceiving his voice do Natsumi and Nia finally notice Shidou's presence.

" ….. ! "

"Oh, Boy. You're too slow."

Natsumi, suddenly shocked, hurriedly brushed her hair up whereas the plain Nia only fixed her eyeglasses' position, and a smile formed on her face.

"Haha.....it looks very impressive. As expected from a pro."

Nia stiffened her chest.

"Well for the time being I can only draw like this, it's simpler."

Opposite to her, Natsumi only revealed an unwilling expression and concealed her drawing altogether.

".... I just drew because Nia let me, not because I wanted to …."

"Hehe, you've gone this far and still refuse to admit it? Merely moments ago we were just discussing about the plot advancements for our manga side by side, weren't we?"

"When did I say that?! And what's a plot advancement for god's sake?!"

Natsumi exclaimed unbearably as Nia just laughed it off and faced Shidou afresh.

“Well regardless, in practice little Natsumi has a great future. To be honest I even want her to be my own personal assistant. How about it? I’ll pay you a salary of course. If you're interested I can even introduce you to my editor.”

“No, I'm not too captivated. So what about Natsumi?”

“Eh? You see, when I first befriended little Natsumi here, she didn't possess an innate artistic talent.”

“Hm, I don't feel like there's any connection between those.”

Sweat dripped from Natsumi’s face, and Nia didn't seem to hear what Shidou had said. Yet she proceeded to embrace her arms in a rueful manner.

“Anyway, talking about Natsumi, if you combine *Natsumi* and *nut* you get the sensation of being protected, don't you? Just like slightly prying open a crack on a pistachio.” [5]

“...Pffff”

As a matter of fact, such an imagery of Natsumi isn't that difficult to picture, Shidou unconsciously let out a chuckle.

“.....”

Natsumi stared at Shidou *jiii~~~*. He surreptitiously coughed a couple of times before turning towards Nia.

“C-Compared to that, are you really okay with it, Nia? It seems that <Ratatoskr> had prepared a kimono for you to wear….”

Shidou looked at her ordinary attire, though she waved it away shortly after.

“Ah... um, I once wore one of those before, it was rather inconvenient to move in. And also I was practically working backstage all the time, so to be able to see everyone in such brilliant dresses satisfies me enough.”

“Is that so? But I think that one suits you very well.”

For some reason, after listening to him, Nia widened her eyes.

“Heh, heh, heh, already flirting with lovely Nia this early in the year? Fascination deserves to be worldly renowned and fathomed by every man. Could thou be thy legendary ‘Hero that saves the Princess’?”

“Uh, ah, no, this isn't what you think!”

“So that's how it is. Boy has a kimono fetish, eh? Does ogling skin exposed between the kimono slits arouse you? Alright then, I’ll give you this.”

While speaking explicit stuff, Nia reached into her pocket for an already finished wishing plaque and handed it to Shidou.

“Um what's this, so you've already made another one… huh this is?!”

The plaque in his sight had obscured Shidou’s words from coherence.

Of course, it had to be this. On the plaque was a picturesque drawing of a very pretty girl wearing a kimono, intertwined with a boy. This illustration was simply unsuitable for children and feigned a mature age warning. Not only that, beside it wrote, ‘I hope to encounter an opportunity to experience such sensations… - Nia.’ What a specific wish.

“N-Nia.. what is this?!”

“Oh that? Actually I wanted to hang that one up... but your bad-tempered imouto-chan said that it would offend public decency and didn't let me. So I’m giving it to you now.”

“You….”

Cold sweat exuded from Shidou’s forehead as everyone intently stared at the item held in his hands. He could do naught but store it in his bag quickly. Nia subtly grinned at his predicament.

“Moving on, I’m serious about Natsumi’s case. Ah, you come too, Boy.”

“Me? I’m not that skilled in drawing.”

“No…no, an assistant’s work doesn't pertain to only drawing manga. Preparing food, washing clothes, sweeping the floor and what not is also included. Rather than a helper, it's more of a husband’s job. Oh, that's not such a bad idea, let's get married Boy.”

“No thanks...” replied Shidou.

“Well, I could really use an aide. Not only for manga, occasionally, I would be able to hug Natsumi for H-material!”

“Wha...”

“Hiiiiiii?!” 《Your fate is sealed, Natsumi.》

Having heard Nia’s indifferent declaration, Shidou and Natsumi were taken aback, halting their breaths. Although it was a habitual joke of hers, the person involved was present right in front of them.

The next second, sounds of footsteps could be heard *tap tap tap*. With a rustle of skirts, a girl in a kimono appeared at the table.

“Darling~, what are you talking about?? I think I heard Natsumi-san’s name being mentioned perversely.”

The girl with a slender stature approached them, while her eyes emanating an electrifying sparkle.

“M-Miku?!”

Her sudden appearance caused Shidou to glare in awe. She was one of the Spirits whose spirit power Shidou had sealed, and simultaneously one of the mere handful of popular idols, Izayoi Miku. However, from her present state it looked as if she had broken away from showbiz and entered a whole new world.

“Ahh, could it be that you were discussing who gets to be Nia-san’s assistant? If Darling and Natsumi-san are going then I'm going too!! With more than three people we can definitely make something good!”

“Really? That'll be great help. But, Mikki you're an idol. Your wages should be quite expensive...”

“No problem! I don't need any salaries; I'll even donate some money!”

Miku affirmed as she gave a thumbs up.

Abruptly, Miku felt something tug on her body and turned around, only to discover Kotori and Tohka were pulling her legs in hopes of making her fall.

“Yeah, yeah. In any case, don't run into eccentricity since you're still an idol,”

As Kotori said this, she had already inconspicuously changed to her black ribbons some time ago.

“Muu... don't be so willful Miku.”

Miku struggled, “Aww... Kotori-san and Tohka-san are so mean~.”

Mu, Miku, don't struggle too much!”)

“H-hey, wait, it's dange——”

“Wai—”

The table lost its balance and toppled over, taking with it the three people as well. Shidou extended his hand to support them, but in vain. He too surrendered to the force of gravity and entered the entanglement with the others, collapsing on the ground altogether.

“Ouch… is everyone okay? Huh…what’s this?” That was bound to happen. Shidou found himself lying atop Tohka, pressing onto her kimono.

“Wh-what are you doing Shidou?!”

“Aahh s-sorry!”

“Aah~! It's unfair that only Darling and Tohka-san get to have fun! Either one is fine, but please swap places with me!

All the commotion attracted Nia, who was sitting nearby, to come over. She picked up a plaque which fell out from Shidou’s pocket and compared the drawing with his state of affairs.

“Seriously? This shrine's blessings are incredible.....”

Shidou’s and Tohka’s position shared a striking resemblance with her illustration. “

“This is not the time to say that.....! Uuh.....here, could you stand up, Tohka?”

“Uuuuu..”

Tohka, her face now imitating a bright red cherry, grasped onto Shidou’s hand and up righted herself. After apologizing to nearby worshippers, Shidou returned the desk to its former state.

“Really… be careful.”

“Sorry~. I’ll make sure to fall on top of Kotori-san next time.”

“.....”

Kotori remained speechless.

Catching sight of the scene, Nia gave out a chuckle

“Ahaha, I’ll never get tired of watching this.”

“It's not funny...” said Shidou exhaustively.

Nia grabbed her pen and resumed her work.

“Looks like the plaques here are really effective. Alright then, I wish - ‘Boy will be my bride.’”

“Even if it's just a joke shouldn't I be the husband?!”

Nia’s pen continued to wander her canvas regardless of Shidou’s protest.

“Haha, excuse me. Now where should I hang this…..”

“.....”

Putting back her pen, Nia stood up.

“....Eh? What's with this headache.…?”

A sudden dizziness struck her out of nowhere and she momentarily lost control of her body.

“Nia! What's wrong?”

Shidou instinctively reached out his arm to assist her. With her body steadily losing strength, Nia managed to let out a weak smile, “Ara...how prince-like of you... Boy.”

“Never mind that, are you really fine? We better head back and rest,” Shidou suggested with concern.

“Don't mind me. How can I let everyone worry about me on this ‘Otome game’-like Valentine’s Day?”

Nia shrugged her shoulders and Kotori’s voice was emitted from behind Shidou.

“What are you saying, up until yesterday you were confined to a wheelchair… one is available at all times for any emergencies. If you're feeling uncomfortable anywhere you can inform us so we can at least give you a full-body checkup.”

“Kyaaa no way! Imouto-chan worries too much, I'm fine really. Being rightfully embraced by Boy here after pretending to faint has a pretty good effect. You should give it a try too, imouto-chan.”

Kotori furrowed her eyebrows, and Nia proceeded with hanging her wishing plaque. Watching her silhouette, Kotori sighed.

“Really... such a solemn subject reverted so quickly...”

Nia never really did ascertain thoroughly, maybe she disliked heavy atmospheres. She always extricated herself from such situations with a jest. That being said, Kotori feeling anxious about Nia was excusable. No matter what, a few days ago Nia was indeed tethering on the very verge of succumbing to death.

“.....”

Recollecting the events which occurred on the 31st of December, Shidou was still fuming with rage and gritted teeth till this very day. On that day, under DEM industries' command, Nia was forcibly inversed and deprived of her Sephira crystal. Had Shidou and the others not been there, Nia wouldn't have been able to sit here today. However, her survival was not grounds for relief. The enemy had acquired inverse Nia's Demon King - <Beelzebub>, which would do naught but augment DEM industries' assaults on Spirits in the future. This was also one of the reasons why Shidou wished for their days to remain peaceful forever.

There was something else on Shidou's mind.

"Kotori, about that..."

"Yeah."

"We carried out a few investigations but were unable to verify it."

Shidou shut his eyes and answered.

"I see." He couldn't cease thinking about what Nia had said on New Year's Day.

"Pure Spirits? But aren't all Spirits formerly humans?"

In the small hours before the 1st of January, on the rooftop of a building, whilst sitting on a wheelchair Nia said thus.

The surroundings sank into silence. Those who were truly dazed by Nia's words, those who conjectured the truth behind these utterances, as well as those who solely went with the flow; although their reactions were subtly distinctive, everyone was without a doubt dumbfounded.

Spirits - living existences which critically cause exceptional calamities. Their raisons d'être are unknown; but are confirmed to be the cause of spacequakes, an acknowledged phenomenon in today's world.

Kotori, Miku, and Origami can serve as examples of humans absorbing Sephira crystals and transforming into Spirits. As far as Shidou knew, Spirits could be distinguished from humans, but examples were just examples.

But Nia’s statement contradicted all that. If it was something worth investigating then Shidou and the others wouldn't be confused. Pure spirits like Tohka are different from former humans like Kotori; they didn't have the slightest inkling about this world when they first emerged. Although there are those like Natsumi, Kaguya and Yuzuru who have adapted to living here, they adjusted only after gaining timeless experiences and intellect from traversing between both worlds; hence fitting in with humans.

Shidou couldn't just ignore Nia’s doubt. Although she was robbed of her Sephira crystal, and thus drastically losing a major part of her power, Nia still possessed her omniscient angel <Rasiel>. More importantly, Nia could gather all the information she wanted, consequently being able to trace Shidou and the other Spirits’ pasts.

Shidou swallowed. If what Nia says is true, then the Spirits he deemed to be pure Spirits until now were ----

“What's wrong? Sorry, did I startle you?”

Nia broke the silence as Shidou was immersed in his thoughts.

“.....hm?” The possibilities left Shidou stupefied.

“Oh what is it, Nia?”

“In manga we call this ‘the soulless truth’.”

Nia said while pouting and sticking out her tongue *bleh~*.

Shidou remained despondent for a few seconds before standing up and releasing and deep breath.

“You...”

“Ehehe, sorry, sorry. Although I'm just guessing based on my own circumstances, this entire Spirit hypothesis isn't so amusing, eh?”

Seeing the carefree girl, Shidou once again loosened a breath. Kotori and the other Spirits, who were hearing this for the first time, also put on a similar expression.

“Time to go home. It's quite cold out here.”

Kotori shrank back her shoulders and the other Spirits all nodded. Everyone went back inside and Shidou pushed Nia’s wheelchair like how he always did.

Then Nia turned back her head and whispered to Shidou.

“Boy, come to my room later.”

“Eh?”

Hearing her unbecoming somber tone, Shidou suspected that something was out of place.

Nia immediately resumed her unusual disposition.

“What's the matter, Boy? If it's that cold then quickly enter. Is it possible that you're expecting someone to warm you up using their body?” While speaking, Nia demonstrated by hugging herself and writhing on the wheelchair.

“.....”

Shidou rephrased her sentences as if he had misheard, eventually pushing the wheelchair into the indoors.

-- Approximately one hour later.

After the Spirits had all returned to their mansion, Shidou walked over to Nia’s ward through Ratatoskr’s underpass alone. Confirming the room number, Shidou knocked on the door.

“Please come in~.”

“Nia, I'm here. What did you--”

Shidou stopped his words midway as he entered the room. Because the room had another person.

“Kotori? What are you doing here?”

Sitting on the chair beside the bed was Kotori, with her favorite lollipop in her mouth.

“Ahh, I told imouto-chan to come, since she's the commander here. I thought it'd be easier to explain to the both of you.”

“What did you want to say?”

Kotori flicked the lollipop in her mouth.

“It's about earlier just now, right?”

“About the topic of Spirits originally being humans? I thought that was a joke.”

“Yeah, I don't think it'd be appropriate to talk about it in front of them. That was just a cover up I thought of. Consider it a courtesy to previous matters.”

Nia poked out her tongue.

“Like the story of the boy who cried wolf.”

“Oh ho, Boy likes to wolf down H-stuff.”

“I see, so that's how it is.”

Shidou felt as if he was already accustomed to Nia’s manner of speech owing to the fact that he heard her *tsukkomis* nearly every day. On the other hand, this directly conveyed a single fact. [6]

“That means… everything you said just now is true?”

“Yup. Not completely though, because there's something you need to comprehend. The all-knowing angel <Rasiel> isn't genuinely omniscient.”

“..What?!”

“Let me elaborate in order.”

Just when Nia intended to explain, the door flung open. Shidou thought it was strange that the medical staff would visit this late. He looked up to identify who it was, and astonished himself.

“Origami! Mana!”

Origami, who was also together with Nia on the roof earlier, appeared together with Mana, who was wearing a patient's robe similar to that of Nia's.

"Why are the both of you here? Or did Nia call you too?"

Origami quietly shook her head.

"No, I wasn't summoned here. What Nia said just now felt somewhat dubious, so I came here to seek proof. That's all."

She looked at Nia who exaggeratedly pressed against her chest with both hands.

"Heee... This impression of ganging up against Nia-chan is making her heart burst!"

Mana said this after Origami's long period of stillness.

"....."

"A moment ago when I went to the restroom I recognized Nii-sama's shadow and I wanted to clear up something… so I decided to follow you. Unexpectedly I met Master Sergeant Tobiichi along the way."

Nia then raised her voice.

"Wait a minute. What did you just say?"

"Eh? There were some things I wanted to clear up with…"

"No No! Not that! What did you say before that?"

"I saw Nii-sama?"

"NII-SAMA?!"

Nia tranced into absent mindedness akin to a heavenly clergy and put her palms together.

"Excellent! Nii-sama! Such an honorific has only manifested twice in reverie! This is my first time! Ne, neee~, say it again a few more times!"

“So disgusting…”

Mana feigned repugnance and retreated a few steps back. Shidou then decided it was a good time to introduce them.

“This is Honjou Nia. She's a professional mangaka and a Spirit. Although her powers were sealed just yesterday, a lot of things happened and she had to be placed under intensive care.”

“Hello~~”

Nia greeted as she waved her hand.

Mana bowed and initiated her self-introduction. “I’m Takamiya Mana, Nii-sama’s sister and presently a wizard. Although I fought for Ratatoskr before, Kotori-san is currently imprisoning me as you can see.”

“Wait a moment. Don't take this the wrong way, but I don't like it when people flaunt their superiority!”

Kotori resentfully folded her hands and seemed to mind Nia’s words.

“Boy’s sister?”

“Didn't you shout ‘Nii-sama’ just now?”

“Ah sorry, whenever I hear that phrase I keep getting so flustered that I forgot about it.”

“.....”

Shidou had a déjà vu look on his face.

“But that doesn't match. Isn't Boy’s surname ‘Itsuka’? Don't tell me it's a complicated family relationship? Or perhaps Boy is a siscon and forced you to call him ‘Nii-sama’?”

“How did it come to this?!”

Nia laughed ridiculously at the siblings’ embarrassment.

“Don't you think ‘Nii-sama’ is such an adorable form of addressing him?”

“Eh? Does it sound awkward?”

“Could it be that you've always casually greeted him this way?”

As Nia said conscientiously, Mana furrowed her eyebrows. If she started to address Shidou differently from then on, it would be Nia’s fault.

“Well, we've spent too much time chatting about our kinship. Let's continue the previous matter.”

Shidou adjusted his breathing and Nia agreed.

“Alright then, although there are two more people, Ori-ori and imouto-chan #2 is fine.”

“Hold on… what's with that ‘imouto-chan #2’?”

Shortly after Nia started, Mana protested again.

“Well you see, ‘imouto-chan #1’ is already taken,”

Nia pointed to Kotori, which triggered a fit of anger from Mana.

“Kotori-san is his adoptive sister. I’m his genetically related blood sister. In any case she should be the second!”

“Wh-who are you calling second?!”

This time it was Kotori’s turn to scream. Once again, the subject has shifted to this argument.

“Even if you compare our hairstyles, my hair is tied in a single ponytail while Kotori-san’s is tied in twin tails! In combat, I'm technique-oriented whereas Kotori-san is strength-oriented!”

“Don't make me sound like a brainless brute!”

“Calm down you two. Nia, it can’t go on like this. Can you think of another name for Mana?”

As Shidou tried to defuse the quarrel, Nia started to ponder for a little while.

“What about Manacchi?”

“Oh so I'm an aquatic animal now?!”

Mana still had her qualms but decided to stop pursuing the matter any further. In light of seeing that the discussion was making zero progress, Nia cleared her throat and continued.

“Now about the hypothesis that all Spirits are ex-humans, it's still uncertain whether that's true or false.”

“I fail to understand that point. Nia, you regained your memories of being a human before right?”

“Yup,” nodded Nia. “How should I put it, according to Boy I'm not categorized as pure.”

“Eh? Wasn't it because you remembered being a human?”

“According to Boy, that is.”

Nia erected her finger. “Because I was also clueless when I descended upon this world with a spacequake.”

“.....EHHH?”

Shidou couldn't help but expand his gaze. What Nia said did correspond with Tohka and the others’ cases.

“Wait... what about your memories…?”

“Well, listen. Although I didn't know who I was when I appeared here, I was aware of one thing. This should be the same with the other Spirits’ cases.”

“That is….?”

“-- We had powers from our angels.”

“Ahh…”

It was just as Nia said. Be it the unaware Tohka, Yoshino, or Origami who was entrusted with spirit power, they could all utilize their angels unrestrainedly. The divine medium must have contained the cognition for its master to freely manipulate its capabilities.

Shidou felt at ease when he thought of Nia's ability.

"The unknowing me could only rely on my omniscient angel <Rasiel>."

"Don't tell me."

Kotori looked attentively at Nia, to which she replied back.

"Yeah, at that time I came to know, what kind of existence I was, how I attained my power, and why I manifested there."

"Wha…!" Shidou was utterly shocked.

Nia added, "I was once human, but after an incident I lost all hope on my kind….that was when a certain Spirit appeared right before my eyes."

"…..! Phantom?!" shouted Kotori.

It was the same when it happened to Miku, Origami and herself. That infatuated being which could transform humans into Spirits, that furtive Spirit whose body and whereabouts are covered by mosaics, codename <Phantom>.

"Phantom..?"

"Yeah, the Spirit who turned us all into Spirits and has a body hidden in static. Did he or she also appear in front of Nia?"

"Oh so that's its name. Although it's unclear whether it was the same Spirit who approached imouto-chan and the others, there's one thing we know - even if it was me I wouldn't be able to ascertain its identity."

"Couldn't you use <Rasiel> to search for it?"

As Kotori inquired, Nia shook her head.

“The spoiler-hating Nia-chan that time couldn't quell her curiosity and tried to investigate, but I couldn't find anything.”

“How is that possible..?”

Kotori couldn't believe it. <Rasiel>’s omniscience is absolute. There shouldn't be any information shrouded in its bibliography.

“Hmm how should I say this...? <Rasiel> could obtain the data, but I'm unable to decipher it.”

“That means something occurred?”

“I don't know… only <Rasiel>’s referencing was severed, or more precisely its power was forcefully obstructed by some kind of unduly angel using a ‘bug’. Analogous to the manga industry, if the competition is too much, you'd get swamped by the gauged efficacy.”

“Yeah...”

Although Kotori understood what Nia meant, she still felt choked.

“Well in short, I was bestowed a Sephira crystal and transformed into a Spirit by that Phantom. My human recollections were also sealed after that and I remained inactive prior to my arrival.”

“.....”

Shidou was speechless. If Nia’s testaments turned out to be true, then there's a possibility that Tohka and the others also harbored a human past. Seeing Shidou in deep thought, Nia continued.

“That's why I thought everyone was like this. But looking at it attentively, not everyone has the ability to see the past like me. For this reason alone, I avoided discussing it with everyone.”

“I see...” muttered Shidou.

It's true that with Nia's experience, one would think so.

"Everything I investigated into was about me, sorry it's quite subjective."

"No."

Kotori interrupted while autonomously sucking on the lollipop in her mouth.

"The information you provided is very useful. Theoretically speaking, if you're correct, it'll revolutionize what we think. It looks like we'll need to check whether there was a lost girl 30 years ago."

"Sorry about that too. If I hadn't gotten my <Rasiel> snatched away, I could execute that now," repented Nia.

"Never mind that, I'm glad you're safe."

Origami, having kept her mouth shut until now, gave a suggestion.

"However with no of spirit power left, Shidou shouldn't have been able to seal you. You should still be able to summon your angel and manifest your limited Astral Dress."

"Eh? There's still some left?"

As Nia asked in puzzlement, Origami nodded.

"Power sealed by Shidou can flow back during unstable emotions or after controlled training."

"A restless consciousness, eh?"

Nia closed her eyes and began whispering something.

"Hey Nia, you haven't fully recovered yet so don't force it."

"Oh yeah?"

As if masking Shidou's words, Nia's body emitted a pale radiance which coalesced into a book on her hand.

“Ooh! Really...”

“Woah!” The sudden materialization of <Rasiel> startled him.

“That easy?!”

“Ehehe, don't underestimate a mangaka’s wishful thinking! All it takes is a simple deadline!”

Nia responded back in a cheerful manner, while giving a thumbs up.

“.....”

Looks like every mangaka in the world can summon angels, Shidou now respected them more.

“Okay, let's see... where is it...?”

Nia licked her lips and kept flipping the pages of the levitating tome. After a few moments, she knitted her brows.

“What is it, Nia?”

“Hm this won't work. Although <Rasiel>’s ability to scour for information is still functional, it can no longer transmit it to me. I can't understand anything that is inscribed here anymore. It's about the same as when I tried to look up that damned fellow before.”

“Well then, there's no other way.”

“I'm sorry... ---Ah but it's not completely indecipherable. Boy stashes his treasure in...”

“What the hell are you searching for?!”

Shidou shouted with an abashed look on his face.

Kotori and Origami continued unaffectedly.

“At the backmost part of his desk drawer.”

“There are a few in his encyclopedia case.”

“Ehhhh?” Shidou involuntarily spewed out.

Mana’s perspiration flowed down her cheeks as she was staring at the two.

“How do you two know that??”

Kotori and Origami just shrugged away, with an expression of guilt and indifference respectively.

On the other hand, Nia was in the course of affirming <Rasiel>’s leftover power and thought of something.

“So that's how it is... perhaps...”

Nia extending her hand, trying to manifest her Astral dress, and a pen materialized out of thin air.

“Oh, very capable I see.”

Nia proficiently manipulated the pen and scribbled onto a page on <Rasiel>. Unrecognizable characters and innumerable lines formed on the page; a fine example of poor handwriting.

“Nia, what are you doing?”

Nia raised the corners of her mouth and answered.

“I'm writing the future.”

Shidou was amazed at her words. Future description- that was one of Nia’s (godly) abilities which allowed her to realize whatever she wrote on Rasiel.

“It's functional?!”

“This is indeed <Rasiel>’s strongest ability; therefore, in my incomplete condition I can't use it. And also that head of the organization which stole my Sephira crystal, DEM, can't utilize it too.”

“I see...”

Shidou felt relieved after hearing that.

Head of DEM industries, Westcott, having acquired her Sephira crystal after she had inversed, or her inverse Sephira crystal, could arbitrarily call forth the Demon King Beelzebub at any time. Supposing he had the future description ability as well, Shidou and the others would find themselves in a rather desperate situation.

“But why?”

“I have an idea -- <Rasiel> originally constituted of informative pages and blank ones. Ordinary future writing employed blank pages.” Nia showed them the pages filled with what resembled children's drawings.

“This is…”

“Ehehe, <Rasiel> and <Beelzebub> were formerly a single embodiment. The pair couldn't both exist simultaneously. If <Rasiel>’s database in such a state, then I suspect <Beelzebub>’s wielder is also experiencing exhaustion.”

“Ah…”

Shidou realized Nia’s intention. Having witnessed Westcott’s command of <Beelzebub>, Kotori and Origami too followed suit.

“True, while the all-knowing Demon King <Beelzebub> falling into enemy hands is a tremendous loss, this way we can hamper our adversary.”

“Well... only a minor hindrance. It's just that the search engine is now a chaotic mess.”

“Even if it's only that, it means quite a lot. Very quick-witted, Nia.”

“Hehe, I got praised by imouto-chan.”

Nia complacently puffed out her chest.

“Nevertheless, hindering the enemy doesn't mean that we've disabled them, we must be extremely cautious at all times. For this reason, it's enough that I be the only one to shed blood.”

“.....”

Shidou was at a loss for words.

“....Aah, I can't let anyone get injured. That includes you too, Nia.”

Shidou finally uttered. Nia faintly blushed and smiled.

“Ehehe, what's up Boy? Don't tell me you like older girls? And I thought you were lolicon.”

“Y-you…”

“But I’m happy. Thanks.”

Nia responded back in a shyly manner.

“U-uh yeah...”

Looking at the scene at hand, Kotori sighed.

“However, as Nia mentioned, there's the most powerful wizard Ellen M. Mathers and the Demon King <Beelzebub>. That enough was already quite troublesome. Not only that, but a new wizard has appeared.”

“.....”

Origami shuddered while listening to Kotori’s words. Seeing her reaction, Shidou thought of the wizard who descended from the sky and incised Nia’s abdomen yesterday. Come to think of it, Origami knew her name.

“Hey Origami, that time...”

“.....”

As if she read Shidou’s mind, Origami immediately answered.

“Yes. I’m acquainted with that wizard.”

“What?” exclaimed Kotori.

Origami continued with an unchanging expression.

“Her name is Artemisia Bell Ashcroft. She’s affiliated with England's Anti-spirit Team.”

“Artemisia?!”

This time it was Mana’s turn to dissent. She gave an unconvinced look and turned to Origami.

“Are you familiar with her, Mana?”

“Yes, she’s very popular among wizards, I met her before. An SSS-rank wizard that was almost as strong as Mathers. If she had enrolled in DEM at that time, my position would have decreased by a rank.”

“She's that strong….”

Cold sweat dripped from Shidou’s forehead. Mana’s level was in the top five wizards in the world and for her to speak like that… Artemisia’s power was unimaginable.

“That's right… but”

Mana looked over to Origami as if asking for authorization. Origami nodded affirmatively.

“The Artemisia I knew didn't join DEM, maybe something happened.”

“So that's it. We all know what DEM industries are capable of.”

Kotori frowned.

“Anyway, no matter what happened, the truth is that Artemisia is now an enemy. Other than investigating Spirits, we should also be alert against her.”

“.....”

Shidou and the others agreed with Kotori’s statements.

“Okay, let's stop here for today. It would be bad if a certain wounded person rested too late.”

“Oh? Imouto-chan is worried about me? Don't worry; I used to work throughout the night before.”

“I said your current condition requires a lot of rest.”

Kotori face palmed.

Nia, meaning no ill will, bowed apologetically to Kotori and allowed <Rasiel> to vanish in the air.

“Alright, it's time for us to leave.”

“Ah okay.”

After everyone left the room, Shidou paused in his tracks, as if remembering something.

“Mana, you wanted to ask me something just now?”

Everyone had their attention focused on Nia, forgetting Mana’s intention when she arrived.

“Aah that's right.”

Mana remembered at last.

“Nii-sama, didn't your Spirit power go berserk last month?”

“Yeah, you were a big help back then.”

As Shidou remembered, he could only faintly recall his memories of that time. Last month, as result of the spiritual path narrowing, the spirit power overflowed and went amok. Aside from the Spirits, Mana had also lent a hand.

“No, it's my duty to help Nii-sama when he needs it.”

“But”

“Nii-sama would do the same for me right?”

“Eh? Of course.”

“That's why,” said Mana truthfully. “But there's one thing I mind.”

“And that is?”

“When you were fighting Ellen, Nii-sama said to me, ‘It’d be great without any problems, what's up with Mio, didn't she come to help you?’”

“Mio….?”

A confused look formed on everyone else's face.

“Yes, when I heard that, I inexplicably went dizzy, and a hazy image reminisced in my mind. Perhaps this has something to do with me and Nii-sama’s past memories?”

“Is that so…? But…”

Shidou puzzled. He had heard this name somewhere before, but he didn't even know if he had actually said those words.

“I’m sorry but...--”

Just then, Shidou felt a violent dizziness as if the whole world was spinning in his head.

“Eh…”

Shidou’s whole body involuntarily trembled and he collapsed onto the ground.

“Nii-sama?!” Mana tried to support him, but Shidou’s vertigo did not halt.

A vast expanse of whiteness filled his vision and a diminished voice spread through the fog.

《----Mio. That's… my name.》

《Un. I’m happy, very happy.》

《I love you. Let's always be together.》

“Th-this is….”

A perfectly clear figure of a long haired girl could be seen within his muddled mind. The next moment, Shidou’s consciousness fell into an abysmal void.

◇◇◇

“I was really shocked that time when you suddenly collapsed. Those words came from the kimono-outfitted Kotori at the shrine.

“Sorry for making you worry...”

“No problem, I’m used to it already.”

Although she said so care freely, after hearing from Mana, Kotori was the most anxious one back there.

“....What's wrong with that?”

“Ah... nothing,” Shidou petted her head. “I wish Mana was here today.”

“Well, even though she said that she detests crowded places, there were no issues with her medical examination. Maybe we should’ve pulled her here...”

Seeing Kotori fiddle around with her hair, Shidou couldn't help but grin wryly. In response, Kotori shied away timidly.

“Anyway, did anything pop up afterwards...regarding Mio?”

“Nothing at all,” heaved Shidou. He did perceive a sense of familiarity when he heard Mio’s name. However, everything, be it hallucinations or illusions, disappeared without a trace.

“Is that so...”

Kotori fished out another lollipop from her sleeve, tore the wrapper, and slipped the treat into her mouth.

“That's just if.”

“Eh?”

“....If it was back then, including the Mio’s case, what would you do, Shidou?”

“Kotori…,” whispered Shidou. “Don't worry, I’ll be your Onii-chan forever. I won't go anywhere.”

“Wha...I didn't say that!!”

“Haha, sorry. Anyway let’s write our wishing plaques.”

Shidou handed over the pen to Kotori, which she accepted with a ‘teehee’.

◇◇◇

“The problem with this world was neither war nor drugs; rather, it's an elevator breakdown.”

--- Ellen M. Mathers.

Repeatedly reciting those lines in her mind, Ellen was currently ascending the stairs in DEM industries’ Japan branch.

“Ha….. ha…..”

Legs cramped and lungs exhausted, Ellen wailed in agony as her knees were at their breaking point. Her whole body quivered as if she was gushing perspiration everywhere, her pale blond hair sticking laboriously to her face and neck.

“Why…. why did it have to stop now of all times…”

“Everything fine, Ellen?”

The question was raised by the young girl in front of her.

She had slightly deeper blond hair with sapphire eyes and hadn't even broken a sweat - Artemisia Bell Ashcroft. She had joined DEM a few days ago and is now Ellen’s direct subordinate.

“Yeah.”

“But you look tired. Do you require any assistance?”

“There's no need for that.”

“Even though there are still four more floors left?”

“This is merely because we went swimming in the pool just now!”

Before she was convoked, Ellen was indeed exercising in the newly built facility for training.

She exhaled deeply, remembering the previous scene. Wearing a swimsuit which exposed her smooth limbs, Ellen boldly entered the swimming pool. Held in her hand was her beloved weapon Puriduen, which was named after a goddess. Seeing her posture at the scene, numerous wizards cleared her path.

“Could that be a… buoy in her hand? Is it possible that the chief executive can’t --”

“Idiot, don't say that out loud! Are you tired of living?!”

The wizards who were training began to talk in whispers. Although it was difficult to hear from such a distance, Ellen’s frightening disposition made them shiver in fear.

Ellen then raised her hair, ignorant to what extent the commoners would venerably revere of her. Anything works.

“Well then, let's begin.”

Ellen readied her preparations and approached the poolside. Without violating propriety and directly diving in, Ellen slowly touched the surface with her toe and plopped into the water. Puriduen in her hand, she started pitter-pattering her legs.

Unaware of how far she advanced, Ellen spotted her colleague Ashcroft in a nearby lane.

“Ha....Phew...”

A wizard’s main source of capacitance is his CR-unit and isn't hugely affected by his own body's stamina. But enhancing basic physical strength is also very important; hence it wasn't odd that they came here.

Ellen shifted her focus back to the front and tried her best to strike the water with her legs while forwarding her head.

“Ha…. ha….”

After reaching the center of the pool, as if she had reached her physical limit, Ellen stopped to gasp for breath, and headed towards Ashcroft. It looked like even Ellen was no match for her.

“Uwaah~... so fast. How many laps had that swimmer completed?”

“I think it's around her eighth.”

“What about chief executive?”

“Don't ask if you don't want to die!”

The other wizards whispered while observing Ellen and Ashcroft. Although it was unclear, the chief executive proved to be the strongest even out of the battlefield. She was used to being extolled by mortals, but they had begun to gossip and she thought it was time to force them to drop it at that point.

As Ellen began to vigorously swim towards her destination, a message was broadcasted.

“Chief executive and vice chief executive, please proceed to the general affairs room on the 30th floor immediately.”

“....? What's going on?”

Ellen panted as she lifted her head after hearing the transmission through the water.

Although she lagged behind Ellen for a few seconds, Ashcroft finally arrived at the goal. She then hopped ashore and called Ellen, extending a hand to prop her up.

“Ellen, that's us. Let's go.”

“I know.” Ellen had wanted to reject Ashcroft’s offer, but the accumulated fatigue from intense exercise had disordered her body. It was impolite to ignore an act of goodwill too, so Ellen relinquished.

And now…

“Under normal conditions, these stairs wouldn't be a problem for me. But now this is the result of an occasional drill…”

“I also swam you know.”

“I’m different from your extraordinarily sluggish pace!”

Ellen disdainfully turned to Ashcroft.

“If this goes on, Sir, Westcott will be kept waiting.”

“Kuh… that's right...”

Indeed, Westcott, the Director of DEM, lay in waiting on the 30th floor.

“Okay.”

With determined resolution, Ashcroft snuck up behind Ellen and carried her princess-style.

“What are you doing?! Put me down this instant!”

“We’ll be at the 30th floor soon.” As soon as she finished speaking, Ashcroft dashed up the stairs at an inhuman velocity, as if Ellen was weightless.

“Waaa?! R-release me!”

“Soon.”

“Ackk... at least change the position! This posture evokes inappropriate thoughts!”

Ellen struggled to forget that disgraceful event and attempted to bang her head against the wall. Ashcroft sighed as if she was handling an insolent brat.

“Be a good girl and stop messing around. It'll be over soon.”

With a chorus of countless steps, Ashcroft climbed over the ultimate flight of stairs. When she finally arrived, Ashcroft liberated Ellen and straightened out her uniform.

“Never do that ever again, you're not my mother!”

“Okay, okay. Aren't you going to knock on the door?”

“You don't need to tell me that!”

Ellen then did so.

“---- Please come in.”

“Pardon me.”

“Forgive me for making you wait.”

Peering inside, they could see a man sitting on a chair in the room. He had an impaling pair of eyes under a dark ashen hairline - alongside a floating pitch-black book at hand. He was the renowned ruler of this company - Isaac Ray Pelham Westcott, in person.

“Yaa~, I’ve been expecting you, Ellen and Artemisia. You look like you're exhausted, what have you two been doing?”

“Nothing important. Besides that, you called us for something?”

Westcott nodded, and directed their attention towards the book. Demon King <Beelzebub> - the 31st of December's catastrophe of despair.

“--To tell you that <Beelzebub>’s searching encountered some interference a few days ago.”

“Ehh? Did it originate from <Sister>?”

“It seems so. This heavily restricts its omniscience function, a grave mistake. But I managed to decipher that information just in time.”

“Then that means…”

Ellen was momentarily overtaken by Westcott’s words.

“I found it at last - the location of the new Spirit.”

“….. !”

Ellen inhaled, and tightened her fist.

“Has it appeared yet?! Where's the result?”

“----Heh.”

Westcott raised his index finger and pointed at the sky.

Chapter 2 - The Spirit from Space

Monday, January 9th.

Up until yesterday, Raizen High School was a peaceful edifice, only for the large aggregate of students to report to school successively the next day. As they passed through the gate with misted breaths, each of them advanced towards their respective classrooms and exchanged pleasantries with their fellow classmates. Although their dialogues were essentially different, most of them comprised of “Happy New Year”, “Long time no see”, and so on.

The winter holiday had concluded and today was the school opening ceremony.

From today onwards, Raizen High School would welcome its third semester. [1]

“Un…”

Shidou, who arrived together with Tohka, shrugged his shoulders to adjust his school uniform. The garment felt a bit antiquated although it had only been a couple of weeks since he last wore it.

But there was nothing he could do about it. With the beginning of every year, a substantial checklist of activities refreshed its contents, let alone the various events which occurred during the winter vacation.

A certain boy’s voice called out from his right, as Shidou stretched while contemplating these quandaries,

“Hey long time no see, Itsuka.”

In the direction of said voice, Shidou discerned a boy that had spiky hair styled through using pomade - his classmate Tonomachi Hiroto. For some reason, Shidou felt he hadn't seen him in ages. Shidou emotionally sighed and proffered his hand.

“Ah, Tonomachi. Happy New Year.”

“You too, say, what have you been doing?”

“Hm?”

The question caught Shidou off guard. Tonomachi thereupon pointed his finger behind him, to which Shidou inspected three girls quietly whispering something while looking over at him every then now.

They were a girl with a disheveled uniform, a girl emphasizing an expressionless expression, and a petite girl wearing spectacles. The trio’s names from right to left are Ai, Mai, and Mii. They were a pretty famous group from class 2-D.

It wasn't difficult to see that they were gossiping about Shidou barefaced. Indeed, it was obviously regarding a negative issue.

“Ah—……”

Shidou was at a loss for what to do. He just didn't get them.

According to what others told him, when the spiritual path had destabilized last month, Shidou had unconsciously uttered a pile of superfluous mushy words to the three. Of course, Shidou hadn't the slightest reminiscence of that time. But whether he remembered or not, none of that mattered to them.

“Uh… I don't know.”

Regardless of how, it was unnecessary to propagate these allegations of himself. Shidou blurted out a perfunctory sentence, attempting to forget about that.

“Hmhm~ well no matter. Anyway, I just saw Tama-chan at the teacher's office—”

Halfway through Tonomachi’s sentence, the bell signaling the start of classes rang.

“I’ll be going then.”

With that said, Tonomachi also returned to his own seat.

“Hey where’s Tama-sensei?”

“Um well she should be here soon —there she is.”

“.....”

Shidou waved his hand as he watched Tonomachi sit down, his mind full of unfavorable premonitions. Although he also had no memory of the incident whatsoever, Shidou did animatedly propose to Tama-chan when his spiritual path fluctuated.

Basically, the follow-up with everything interrelated to that incident should have been handled by Ratatoskr analyst Murasame Reine, who is also Shidou's assistant class teacher. As he sank into unpleasant thoughts, the door of the classroom suddenly opened, revealing his homeroom teacher, Okamine Tamae, also known as Tama-chan by the students. And around her delicate body, an unparalleled gloomy was overcast.

"Uoohh…"

Shidou pondered while seeing her condition, as well as his classmates. The students all began to enquire confusedly.

"Muuu... Shidou, what's going on with Tama-chan-sensei? She looks so sad today," asked Tohka beside him.

"Aah, uhh... I have no idea," mumbled Shidou.

As if she was deaf, Tama-chan sluggishly trod into the room and stepped onto the platform, attendance book in hand.

"....Everyone, happy New Year. How was your vacation? Christmas plus New Year's Eve plus New Year's Day….—must've been quite happy."

Although she didn't say anything weird, she didn't prohibit the whole class to gasp. Tama-chan smiled hypocritically, devoid of any emotion.

"How old is everyone this year? Since everyone was promoted from your second to third years in high school, you should be around 18 years old. Those of you born later should be 17. My birthday will be in March, guess how old sensei will be…"

Raizen High School's most famous teacher, Tama-chan, was 29 years old. Everyone knew that for a fact, but no one dared to say that. Looking around, she let out a weary smile as if she attained enlightenment.

"I… will finally graduate from my late twenties to my thirties… huhuhu... great right?"

Perhaps it was due to miserable pity that everyone remained silent. Ai softly called Tama-chan's name. Fluorescent light reflected off her glasses, dazzling Ai with its radiance.

"**Shut up.** From now on, anyone who wants to speak with me must add **Sir** before and after sentences!"

"S-sa…. **yes Sir!**" Ai was overwhelmed by Tama-chan's momentum and respectfully followed her order.

"**Sir**, Tama-chan what happened, **Sir**?!"

As Ai repeated, Tama-chan answered back in a ruthlessly ridiculing manner.

"Nothing, nothing happened. Everything's fine, except for some news worthy of celebration. My friend from primary school, Airi-chan, will be getting married next month. Huhuhu, really good news. Because Airi-chan's so great, her husband must be great too. We were together for every birthday and Christmas each year, and even exchanged chocolates every Valentine's day. When we drank till we were drunk, she used to carry me and say, 'Ugaahh~ if I'm still single when I reach thirty, marry me Tama-chan!' and so on. It seems like her future spouse is a doctor younger than her by a couple of years. During last year's 'Men are all bastards' reunion for us girls, Airi-chan sprained her leg while drunk and fell in love at first sight with the doctor that treated her, their relationship developed fiercely. Although I was at the scene that time, I got drunk and fell asleep at the clinic, becoming a third wheel. Who would've thought that in that short amount of time, my best friend for all those years fell into the river of love right in the next room? Life is so unpredictable, how I wish everything was a dream. In reality, I was also thinking that if even Airi-chan, who's such a wonderful girl, didn't get any attention, men sure are blind. Airi-chan is really a remarkable woman. Beautiful, elegant, she was practically a model. Because she was still single, I felt that it was still unimportant. But Airi-chan was captivated by a man behind my back. Actually I started noticing that she came to our reunion less frequently last year. Airi-chan's so evil. How could she betray me like this by getting married? All those lies 'it's so embarrassing' and such...they were a ploy to arouse men's lasciviousness. I need to carefully learn this skill too."

Tama-chan rattled on monotonously while leaning her upper body on the lectern.

"Hu…huhu...and another one of my classmates gets married.. Vile! Evil! Spouses are all outstanding fellows…"

Tama-chan began to cachinnate *he.he.he* derisively as if she was possessed by some entity.

“Everyone… everyone abandoned me… tell me... How many more wedding celebrations do I need to attend…?”

“**S-Sir**, that uhh.., **Sir**!”

“Wait for me everyone… I’ll join you soon... ha...haha... I’m so incapable... Why has god forsaken me so…?”

As if something had finally cracked inside her, Tama-chan glared at the dumbstruck students.

After a considerable period of quietness, she flipped open the left out attendance book.

“...Alright, begin roll call.”

Tama-chan approached Ai, Mai, and Mii indifferently, to which the trio shook their heads imposingly.

“N-n-n-no!”

“**Sir**, you look problematic, **Sir**!”

“**Sir**, get some rest, **Sir**!”

“What? I’m perfectly fine”

Tama-chan smiled with perfect relief.

“But if a demon appeared before me right now and offered me a wish in exchange for my life, I’d probably wish for a meteor to befall Japan next month.”

“That's why such a thing is…!”

“Isn't that how a primary school pupil would think before school starts?!”

“Huhuhu... didn't I say that was a joke? Hee… hee... meteorite… unleash yourself..”

Chalk in hand, Tama-chan pretended to be a magic girl waving her magic stick and hurled the piece of calcium carbonate out the window with a *haa!* as if she casted a magic spell.

—And then, in that instant.

An enormous deflagration in the sports ground reverberated throughout the now vulnerable classroom, the shockwave shattering the glass windows and fluttering the curtains. The students inside screamed in unison and hid under the tables.

“Uaaahh!”

“Hyaaaaa!”

“W-what’s... going on?!”

With one hand covering his resonating ear, Shidou carefully brushed off the shards of glass on his uniform and stood on a chair to peer outside.

“—Shidou, look at that,”

Origami, who affirmed the situation first, pointed to outside. Shidou walked over to the window, creaking over the fragments. Trembling with trepidation, he gingerly gazed down.

Shidou observed the now annihilated school sports ground, along with the nearby roads and expanses, as if the whole area had been decimated by a spacequake. However, there was no warning siren so he searched intensively—.

“....Eh?”

At the epicenter of the destruction, Shidou could indistinctly identify a black lump of matter. From his location, he couldn't distinguish anything clearly but it appeared to be some sort of ultimate demolisher or huge rock. In other words, it could be deduced that the gigantic crater and previous shockwave emerged from ‘That Thing’ colliding with the surface. Since the impulse of force was so great, it must've dropped down from somewhere high.

The other students should have figured out something similar. Tonomachi idly gazed at the sky, and said, “M-meteor..?”

“Haauu..”

Tama-chan’s complexion returned to its ghastly pale state.

“Uwaaahh~ Tama-chan summoned a real meteor!!!”

“She unwarily contracted a demon?!”

“Tama-chan! Don't die on us!!!” Everyone ran towards her despite her supercilious look.

Meanwhile, Shidou’s phone rang in his pocket, an incoming call from ‘Itsuka Kotori’. Although it was against the rules to talk on the phone during class, the current matters warranted an exemption. Shidou headed towards a quieter corner and pressed the converse key.

“Shidou! Are you okay?!”

Kotori shouted loudly at the other end.

“A-ah listen to me Kotori, Tama-chan signed a contract with the devil and summoned a…”

“Haa? Have you gone crazy? Anyway take Tohka and the others to the commander office here! Fast!”

“T-that means…”

Shidou was stupefied.

“Yeah, a new Spirit has appeared.”

◇◇◇

After travelling in the bus for about 10 minutes, Shidou, together with Tohka, Origami, Reine and the Yamai sisters from the next class, arrived at Ratatoskr’s underground facility. Ratatoskr had originally employed its floating airship Fraxinus as its headquarters; however, it had suffered critical damage in the previous warship battle

and was in repair. Therefore, Shidou and the others had occupied the nearby underground facility as their impromptu base.

At the security check, Shidou and Tohka parted from each other as they were approaching the command room. Despite the fact that they were specifically instructed to wait in another room caused Tohka to feel dissatisfied, Shidou had to discuss strategies once a new Spirit appeared. It was best not to let the other Spirits see the scenario.

As Shidou stepped inside the command room, he felt a complicated sense of nervousness directly on his face. The crew of Fraxinus all assembled in front of their respective automation console monitors within the room, urgently carrying out their tasks.

“You're here,”

Kotori retorted while sitting on the captain's seat in the center of the command room.

Seeing Shidou beside her, Kotori switched her ribbons, undeniably to black. She wore her military uniform with crimson stripes on her shoulders.

“Sorry to have kept you waiting.”

Reine, who came here together with Shidou, took off her white overcoat and sat on an empty seat.

“No, you've done well.”

“Alright, the situation is like this.”

“Ah...how did that come about? You said that meteorite was generated by a Spirit, but the spacequake warning didn't ring. Is it an unhostile apparition? But immediately attacking the school… could it be targeting Tohka and the others?”

“—U-un...”

Towards Shidou’s question, Kotori adopted a perturbed expression and held her chin.

“What in the world is going on? To be honest, even I haven't the slightest idea.”

“Wh-what does that mean?”

“Hmm… Show the current site on the monitor.”

The crew began to operate their consoles.

Then, on the large screen in front, the world map was projected. Red dots were scattered over every continent, island and ocean.

“This is….?”

“Aye, an unknown object appeared in your school’s campus, right? These identical phenomena occurred in every marked location on the map simultaneously.”

“Wha..?”

Shidou couldn't help but wrinkle his eyebrows and stare fixedly at the cartogram.

“All these places… at the same time?”

For a moment it was hard to believe, that artilleries dropped onto 42 locations in the whole world altogether, including a multitude of Anti-Spirit Team bases and various DEM industries’ branches in many countries. Therefore, the possibility that it was a sniper operation done in response to sensing feeble spirit waves and magical power could not be eliminated.

“W-wait a moment. Even South America was raided! But isn’t that on the other side of the world?! Were those locations attacked by duplicate Spirits like the Yamai sisters?”

“N-no, that doesn't seem to be the case. The Spirit is without a doubt a single entity. Also to be precise, that projectile isn't truly a meteorite,” replied Kotori with a light shake of her head. Shidou perplexed.

Kotori presumably knew that her words weren't completely clear. Flicking the now double lollipops in her mouth, she issued orders to the crew.

“Seeing once is better than hearing a hundred times. Play the video.”

“Roger!” exclaimed one of the crew’s members, <Boss> Mikimoto, while operating his console.

The screen which previously graphed the world map now began to play a video.

“——” Watching the scene which transcended reality and fantasy, Shidou ceased breathing for a split second.

On the frame was a lusterless, black, and abstruse darkness. And within that unilluminating presences, flickered countless tiny specks. Shidou first believed it to be the night sky, but quickly dismissed that notion as he noticed something was amiss.

There was a gradually rotating sphere at the bottom of the frame. A vortex of white and blue as far as the eye can see. Indeed, that was the planet where Shidou and the others resided, Earth.

“The universe….”

That was the literal metaphor of the consummate separation of the heavens and the earth. And at the very center, a young girl floated unconstrainedly.

Above all, her beautiful long hair continuously radiated magnificent phosphorescence in spite of the black hole-like darkness that shadowed everything else. The unparalleled gorgeous golden hair would make anyone recognize her as the fairytale girl Rapunzel, drifting leisurely in that deep dark realm. Her Astral dress was embellished with patterns of various constellations and in her hand held a rather lengthy staff.

“This girl is….?”

“Yeah—we just recently confirmed this Spirit. We haven't decided on a fixed codename for her yet. For convenience, we’ll call her <Zodiac> temporarily.

“First time?”

“Yup, of course excluding any unobserved possibilities, at least in Ratatoskr’s database. Her angel, Astral Dress, abilities, temperament and et cetera are still unknown.”

“So that's how it is. Is her method of attacking the Earth identified yet?”

As Shidou questioned, Kotori replied back with a heavy sigh.

“To tell the truth, there's a reason why we were able to detect this Spirit.”

“A reason?”

“Aye. Broadcast the video taken three hours ago.”

“Roger.”

And so, the big screen started to display a different tape.

Although the background was still in outer space, this time <Zodiac> seemed to be dormant, her whole body curled up and calmly floating in the cosmos.

“This is….”

Shidou’s words halted midway.

The recording showed a different figure.

“A space warship?!” Shidou was taken aback and rounded his eyes.

An armada of three gargantuan space warships emerged from Earth and not only that. Innumerable termite-like figures gathered around each ship. Upon closer inspection, each of those figures could be distinguished to be humanoid machines.

There's no doubt that those were DEM industries’ unmanned weaponry <Bandersnatch> units.

“Could that be...DEM?!”

“Yeah, they were the ones who discovered <Zodiac>’s presence. After we sensed something suspicious from their warships, we used automatic cameras to scout that area and found her too.”

Kotori reply was marked with a hint of disgust.

“H-how can DEM find Spirits….”

Shidou blurted before stopping in realization. Kotori shared his opinion and nodded.

“I’m afraid it's <Beelzebub>. It couldn’t be helped, even though Nia can hamper it somehow.”
Then the screen showed another change.

DEM’s warships locked onto the inactive <Zodiac> and carried out preparations for an assault. The warships expanded their territory and charged up numerous cannons with devastating magical power. Meanwhile the <Bandersnatch> units around the Spirit began to load their own CR-units.

“Oii… isn't that a bit overkill?”

“Just keep watching.”

<Zodiac> gained awareness of her surroundings and unhurriedly lifted her head up. With an indifferent expression, she glanced as if she didn't care about the impending danger, stretched her body and raised her right hand.

“<”Seal-Removing Lord” — Michael>,”

The girl uttered the name very softly.

The next moment, a luminous staff materialized immediately from the hollow void, the same as the one grasped in her hand in the previous video. At the top end of the staff adorned a luxurious star accoutrement, and on the bottom end inlaid saw tooth edges, resembling a key.

“An angel…?”

“It looks like it.”

The <Bandersnatch> units commenced their assault and encircled <Zodiac> while charging their laser sabers. She kept herself calm and composed and inserted the front end of the key in vivo towards the direction of the Bandersnatch, turning it to the right as if it was in a keyhole.

“——《Segva -Lock》.”

With a sound of metals colliding sonorously, the <Bandersnatch>’s four limbs drastically lost their turgidity and its territory vanished into nothingness. Despite being at the offensive moments ago and their fearless nature, every single one of them instantly lost

their will to fight and remained motionless. It was as if their power source was sealed off.

“Th-this is….” gasped Shidou.

“<Michael>. From analysis of the video, we can infer that this angel has the ability to seal the target’s function by impaling it with the key.”

Reine said so as if interoperating smoothly. By that time, <Zodiac> had already crippled the incoming <Bandersnatch> units, machine by machine.

However, DEM had already expected that result. A few Bandersnatches would be insufficient to seize <Zodiac>. While she was dealing with them, the three warships had finished charging their cannons with magical power. The fleet then opened fire from three different directions, releasing a dense accumulation of magic. The dark space was instantly permeated by dazzling rays of light.

“Uwaaah…”

But <Zodiac> remained unaffected by her imprisoned plight and directed the bottom end of her staff to the front.

The key faded as if it had been engulfed in space, and <Zodiac> turned it to the left.

“——《Rātaibu -Unlock》.”

In that instant, a collapsed black hole energized around <Zodiac>, absorbing all the bombardments fired at her.

“Wh-what….?!”

Shidou widened his eyes.

Yet it had not ended there. Another black hole emerged behind the warships and <Bandersnatch> units. The artillery had not just been nullified, but the astonishingly powerful bombs were also teleported, without losing a shred of their energy.

The pitch-black world was once again reignited as explosions burst forth. The whole armada of three warships and countless of <Bandersnatch> units were blown away by their own immense firepower.

“DEM’s bombs were….?!”

“...Yeah. That's one of <Michael>’s abilities.”

“The key alters the very fabric of space-time to unlock space, thereby creating a wormhole. Moreover, she can also set its destination.”

“A Spirit opening gates with a key… could she be…?!”

Shidou, who suddenly realized something, turned towards Kotori.

“Figured it out? Well, afterwards <Zodiac> started attacking the Earth. Opening gateways like previously, ingesting the aftermath of DEM’s warships’ wreckage.”

“How did she designate the tens of locations throughout the world?”

“It seems so. She was sleeping peacefully but was woken up by the warships...she's certainly enraged with wrath. In the event of the remnants escaping combustion in the atmosphere and being directly delivered to the surface, they would preserve their mass and smash into the ground. On the other hand, luckily she didn't do so and the force of her attack was reduced by a large margin, maybe due to her not throwing it over several thousands of kilometers.”

“Is that so… the shockwave felt really powerful though.”

Shidou furrowed his brows as he remembered the scene.

“If meteors of that size actually showered, it definitely won't just be till this extent. It wouldn't be surprising if the blast radius covered tens of kilometers - it would be a fait accompli for someone like her capable of generating wormholes. No, the damage just now is already critical.”

“.....”

Cold sweat covered Shidou’s face. An extremely horrifying ability… On the basis of its distinct applications, perhaps even the Earth could be annihilated. Shidou stabilized his mood by taking deep breaths.

“...Then, what should I do?”

Shidou was aware that he had to get acquainted with the new Spirit in order to seal her powers.

However, this time his target's location is in outer space. He couldn't just approach her and chat with her. On the contrary, it was already hard enough to come into contact with her.

“That's right. No matter how hard it is, it’d be quite troublesome if she were to launch another blitzkrieg. In short, time is of the essence. Let's conduct a dialogue with her.”

“Converse with her…. how? Telephone and mail will get us nowhere.”

Kotori showed solicitude to her blockhead brother.

“Are you stupid? How do you think we captured this video?”

“Video...ah! There was something like that!”

Shidou realized he had forgotten about this point.

“Of course, although there are a few adjustments, function-wise it's similar to Fraxinus’ Yggd Folium. As it has a Realizer installed, it can spread out its territory.”

“I see. If I can stay within the territory's range…”

“Aye. Normally it's impossible for sound to travel through a vacuum, but it can be transmitted utilizing the territory. Also, bring that thing.”

Kotori’s second in command Kannazuki Kyouhei then responded, “Roger,” and beckoned Shidou to come over with an object. After removing something from one end of the object, he handed it over to Shidou.

“Come, Shidou-kun. Wear this and stand upright.”

“Eh? What's this?”

It appeared to be a receiver in the form of a piece of head wear, some type of supplementary goggles. Although he didn't know what it was for, Shidou followed Kannazuki’s instructions and put it on overhead.

Kannazuki then aimed the camera lens at Shidou and began to operate his console.

“Commander, preparations OK!”

“Very well. Start the experiment then. I'll leave it to you.”

“Roger!”

Responding to Kotori’s order, <Deep Love> Minowa operated her automation console. Soon after that, the apparatus in front of Shidou started to give out a mechanical sound.

Puzzled, Shido was unable to determine what has happening.

“What's going on?”

——In front of Shidou, another Shidou appeared.

“Waah!?”

Shidou got intimidated by the unexpected appearance and fell down on his back. Surprisingly, the other Shidou imitated his actions.

“O-o-ouch… is that..?”

“This device can read Shidou’s physical data and project a three-dimensional image. Of course, the Realizer’s automated camera also has this utility.”

“Looks very lifelike...”

Shidou extended his hand to poke his other self, but due to it being a mere hologram, his finger penetrated right through.

“For the time being it isn't switched on yet, but the goggles will display what the camera records when you begin.”

“So that's how it is. This way I’ll be able to communicate with the spirit vis-à-vis.”

Shidou thought, “If you had such a device why didn't you let me use it sooner?!”

“Yeah. We haven't got much time so let's start. Who knows when she’ll launch another attack.”

“—Ah, understood.”

Shidou nodded firmly with a hand on his chest to regulate his palpitation. Frankly, he wanted to get accustomed to the goggles first and prepare himself mentally. But just as Kotori said, there wasn't any time for him to plan his strategies, so he clenched his fists and exhaled deeply.

Shidou clapped his nervously stiff cheeks and smiled. When confronting Spirits, Shidou’s deck didn't consist of weapons, but loving words. His heart should possess the firm belief to save the Spirit in order to suppress his fear of talking face to face.

“Ready anytime, Kotori.”

“Not bad.”

Kotori raised the corners of her mouth and repositioned herself on her seat. She took out her doubled lollipops from her mouth and pointed at the screen.

“Well then, commence operation <Long-Distance Love>!”

“Understood!” The crew answered in unison, each carrying out their respective assignments.

“Autonomous camera number 1 is approaching target.”

“The Realizer projection has been initialized.”

“Target’s state of mind is synchronized on monitor.”

“Preparations are completed. Get ready, Shidou-kun.”

“Yeah!”

The next instant, Shidou’s field of view changed from the command room to outer space.

“..... !”

Shidou couldn't help but gulp.

The boundless darkness was incomparable to the limitless stars which glowed brilliantly, as well as the celestial mass of greenish blue in his sight. That majestic scene strove for Shidou’s attention.

But now was not the time for sightseeing. Shidou slowly came back to his senses.

Before his eyes was the silhouette of a slender blonde girl floating in midair. That mysterious and awe-inspiring look really suited her.

“Let's begin, the Earth’s and the Cosmos’ long distance relationship.”

Although Kotori’s words contained a tinge of comedy, her tone was serious.

“Hi, good morning.”

“.....”

The Spirit immediately raised her staff at Shidou’s head in response, emitting a ray of light.

“Uoohh…!?”

Although his body reacted, it was too late. Rays of golden chromatic light weaved into a single beam and burst forth through Shidou’s head and into the endless universe at light speed.

“What the hell!?”

Shidou exaggerated his shock and toppled onto the floor, his whole body writhing and both hands covering his head. Simply, it was a pitiful condition.

“K-Kotori! I-I’m dead!! My h-head!!”

“Stop freaking out. Your head’s still there.”

“.....! Aah…”

Shidou retrieved his calmness. Due to the image being too authentic, the misconception of actually being struck arose. But in reality, only Shidou's volumetric hologram was hit. Shidou did get hurt though from hitting the back of his head during his fall. Shidou felt embarrassed and stood back up.

"What a cruel Spirit… I'd be screwed if that was the real me."

"Maybe she's still agitated by DEM's assault. I wouldn't be surprised if she suddenly heard a voice behind her and thought it was an enemy. Let her know that we mean no harm."

"Th-that's right…"

After unwinding, Shidou equipped the goggles again and his avatar's head regenerated. His display returned to the sight of the girl.

"Please calm down. I'm not your enemy and I won't attack you."

".....huh?"

The girl looked expressionlessly at the second Shidou and inclined her head in confusion.

Not waiting for him to reply, the girl immediately flew away towards the piles of rubble, accelerating past Shidou.

"Gwaahh!?"

Shidou jolted instinctively but not as pathetically as before and continued while quelling his shock.

"Wait, I —"

The girl who circled around Shidou used her staff to ruthlessly pulverize his head, again.

"Kuhh!? N-no, hear me out—"

"....."

The tattered fragments of scrap metal, which obeyed Newton’s laws of motion, pierced through his limbs as they collided with the girl’s momentum.

“L-listen to me….”

“.....”

Dozens of rays of light punctured Shidou into a honeycomb.

“Ugaaaaahhh!!”

Shidou mourned as his body was torn to pieces.

“This war maniac! It's only been a few minutes and I died five times already!!”

Reine touched her chin, lost in thought.

“Hmm… I didn't expect her to be so violent. It looks like using the hologram was the right choice.”

“—! Wait! The Spirit!”

<Nail Knocker> Shiizaki shouted, directed everyone’s attention towards the big screen, only to discover the girl engrossed in Shidou’s regenerative body. That gave a bewildered invariable expression, but her movements were substantially different.

“——Inconceivable. Why doth thou not decease?”

Her intonation lacked any modulation, tranquil to the utmost point. Even so, she had finally replied in a way unrelated to combat. Shidou overly nodded.

“Ah, aahh! I wanted to talk to you so I placed a three-dimensional projection here. So a-ahh ouch... stop... Don't dig other people's stomachs when they're speaking!”

Shidou muffled his abdomen in agony. The girl used the front end of her staff to stab his belly, stirring it as if it were a soup spoon.

“Three-dimensional projection, eh? Inconceivable in sooth, better in my mind not undertook.”

“O-oh...”

Shidou grinned wryly. “A-anyway, if you don't mind may I know your name?”

The girl stopped mixing Shidou’s belly and lifted her head.

“Mine name? It matters naught. ‘Tis Mukuro. Hoshimiya Mukuro.”

“Mukuro… that's your name?”

“By my troth,” nodded Mukuro. “Thou art? To enquire another's fore claiming thine own -- deplorable morality.”

“Ah sorry, I’m—” Halfway through, his vision was thrown out of the window.

“Waa!? What's wrong?”

“Prithee, hast thou some ill a’brewing?”

“N-no... everything’s fine.”

“Calm down, options have appeared,”

Following Kotori’s voice, some text popped up.

It seems that the options which appeared on the big screen in the command room had also appeared in Shidou’s vision. How marvelous.

① “I’m Itsuka Shidou. Let's be friends.”
② “I’m Itsuka Shidou. Be my lover.”
③ “I’m Itsuka Shidou. I’ll be your master from now on. Be my obedient slave. I’ll train you until you can no longer live without me.”

“Everyone, choose!” The sound of button pushing could be heard. The statistics were shown in a pie chart. And the option with the largest proportion was:

“I see... ③ huh?”

“Affirmative. At first glance ① and ② look safer and more reliable, but we need to go on the offensive here.”

“That's true. Right now we're unaware whether her state of mind is favorable or not, so we'll need to see her response pattern.”

“Makes sense. Well it's just a hologram anyway so it won't die. We need to exploit this advantage. --- Shidou it’s ③.”

“Wait just a moment!!!!”

As always, the final decision kept driving Shidou mad.

“What's wrong Shidou? Suddenly shouting like that..”

“What's wrong my ass! Why is it ③?! Isn't ① good enough!?”

“Stop overreacting. The truth is you won't die anyway so you need to test her reactions with tougher words. Hurry up, Mukuro’s waiting.”

As Shidou was neglecting Mukuro, he hesitated to agree with the choice but finally decided to open his mouth.

“I’m Itsuka Shidou. I-I’m going to be…your m-master! B-become my s-slave, I’ll train you until you can't live without m-me!!”

“Huh... Itsuka Shidou, eh?”

Mukuro repeated while holding her chin and treating it like nothing out of the ordinary.

“She didn't care at all?!”

Kotori screamed loudly towards her subordinates. Although Shidou expected a bad reaction, her despondency exceeded his expectations.

“How is the Spirit’s emotional state and happiness level developing?!”

“No changes at all!”

“The values are too stable!”

“How is that possible?! Did she not hear Shidou? But she got his name...”

Kotori retorted her words in astonishment.

“Curiosity I have. Wouldst thou aught with me?”

“Eh? A-ah...”

As Shidou prepared to answer, Mukuro pointed her staff at the Earth.

“Three-dimensional projection… thy flesh must be on I ‘heavenly body from whence thou appear. Loathsome sham, Fie! Dare thou spit falsehoods, this me shall punish thy ground.”

“Wha…?!”

Shidou bit his lip, dreading the meteor which had fallen in the sports ground previously.

“What say thee?”

Mukuro asked, asking for his reply. Kotori sighed.

“She's serious. Shidou, talk with her. Complicating things will be troublesome.”

“A-ah, okay.”

“I want to—save Spirits like you.”

Shidou then revealed everything, his objective, the existence of Ratatoskr and the hostile corporation DEM, as well as his powers.

“...Hmm.”

Mukuro contemplated without any expression. Shidou looked at the pair of golden eyes staring at him between her flowing hairs and held his breath.

“True to thy heart, Gramercy. This self hath undergone tremendous change early to venturing herein.”

“Ah, so will you come to the surface for me to seal your powers?”

Shidou requested rather nervously.

“Methinks thine offer best unheeded,”

Mukuro replied back without the slightest hint of hesitation. Be that as it may, this was well anticipated. After all, there had been similar cases before. Shidou furrowed his eyebrows and continued.

“Guuu.. well I can't force you to believe in me. But what I said is true. I want to save—”

“I carry no doubt.”

“...Eh?”

“Fair intentions imbue thy words, ergo I suspect naught.”

“If that's the case, then why…?”

“Thy gist I hath procured. But I shan’t with take any alms. I simply be as I be.”

“B-but that way DEM may attack you again!”

“D, E, M….”

Mukuro enunciated clumsily as she tried to recall something.

“The crude iron I dismantled? I will obliterate every mortal instrument disregarding their numbers.”

“That's not it; DEM has even more powerful weapons called wizards which are dangerous!”

“Likewise, there exists not something that can triumph over my angel. If I become entrenched in peril, <Michael> will open a gate for me to flee. Or can this D, E, M thou speak of pursue me at the rapidity of even light?”

“That…”

Shidou was at a loss for words. If Mukuro was indeed capable of those, then whoever tries to capture her will face near impossible difficulties. But he couldn't just leave her like that. There were Ellen, Artemisia, and the now wielder of <Beelzebub>, Westcott. Who knows what they were capable of?

However, that was not the only reason why Shidou wanted her to come to the surface. He continued to persuade her.

“But there's a lot of fun stuff on Earth and there are also Spirits like you. Don't you feel lonely being in this kind of place all by yourself?”

“...Lonesome, eh?” Mukuro shook her head. “As terrified as I am with thine anxiety, loneliness remains unfelt.”

“But how? Don't be so stubborn. Being together is—”

“Fie, all perceptions, be it mirth, melancholy, wrath or grief, art bygone from me. Love’s fair share too. Long a gone hath I locked mine heart.”

“....Eh? L-lock??”

“Aye, <Michael>’s ability.” Mukuro showed Shidou her staff.

<Michael>. 《Segva -Lock》 is one of its abilities, which seals any target’s power. Shidou had witnessed it in action before when Mukuro locked the <Bandersnatch> units, snatching away their power and rendering them to pieces of scrap.

If her angel could affect even intangible objects, then it could indeed seal Mukuro’s feelings.

“H-how did it come to that…? Not only sadness and sorrow, but even joy…!”

“Perjury lay not upon me. Ask thou why? Dispensable forfeiture, nay, and aspects of misfortune I say. I know not what I used to anymore.”

“B-but you can talk to me normally like right now…”

“Speech retains, though gentle riddance grieves me not. At root, serenity t’was all I desired, thus I journeyed this untouchable universe. To be infuriated or to endeavor kin affection, everything would disrupt the status quo. The aerolites I dropped were mere admonishments to ward off humans invading my domain,” explained her with an unchanging look.

She resembled a recluse, introverted hermit, or whatever dry and dull celestial being. Shidou couldn't help but grasp his fist.

“That…that's too sad. Please, return to Earth. I want you to be happy!”

“.....”

Mukuro remained speechless.

After a modicum of moments, she started to move her mouth.

“I pray thee, Shidou, thou seemed to have misunderstood.”

“....Eh?”

“What I deem as happiness—’tis unjust for thou to resolve hither and thither.”

“..... !”

Shidou felt suffocated by her words.

“Thou may have saved Spirits from damnation before, which I believe. But I am me. Why doth thee wish to aid me?”

Shidou was dumbfounded by what she said. Mukuro continued, ignoring whatever reply he had.

“Ere I be redeemed or happy, in sooth I would be not. Thine infallibility marks thy words. Methinks thou take me for granted.”

“Th-that, kind, of thing…”

Shidou’s voice shivered, wanting to deny what Mukuro said but he didn't have any strength to refute. Mukuro seemed to have noticed something and stared at him.

“All drained of rebuttal?”

It came from a voice from behind him.

“What do you mean..?”

Hearing that, Shidou remembered that Ratatoskr was still supporting him. As he reflected about his issues, Mukuro resumed her interrogation.

“This so-called D, E, M originates from whence thou came, ay? If thou hath sealed me, couldst thou also ensure my protection? Hath thy sealed Spirits never sustained another fiendish foray?”

“....! Th-that’s…”

Shidou couldn't vociferate any reason.

The battles against DEM flitted across his mind. Ahh, that's right. Shidou did seal the Spirits’ powers. He had always thought it was for the Spirits’ own good and the Spirits were willing too. But as a result, they also encountered many crises. Seeing Shidou’s inner conflict, Mukuro softly declared her standpoint.

“All in all, Shidou, thy hypocrisy is like a maze lest I be snared. Cease ever returning and be gone.”

“..... !”

Shidou pained from rejection, as if he got hit by an iron bar on the head. If only it was real, he wished. Mukuro’s hurtful words spread throughout his body like wildfire.

“...Shidou, don't be too upset. What you have done for us definitely isn't a mistake.”

Kotori, who responded to him, was the first Spirit he sealed. Shidou couldn't live with himself, although having understood Kotori’s words. But—

“‘Tis the end of our banter. Where I depart lays only tranquility, only preservation. Where no soul may bother me — I bid thee farewell.”

Mukuro said so monotonously as she raised her staff and pointed to Earth.

“If approached once more, I hereby command thee, <Michael>, halt this planet’s motion.”

“W-wha….?!”

“Its powers are capable of even that…?!”

Kotori’s predicament reverberated in Shidou’s eardrums.

“With this, that D, E, M will begone. This shall be our eternal parting, Shidou. Henceforth adieu.”

Mukuro raised her staff and stabbed the front end through Shidou’s projection camera.

“——《Segva -Lock》.”

As Mukuro turned her key, in that instant—

With an accompaniment of static noise, Shidou’s field of vision was thoroughly obstructed.

Chapter 3 - New Wings

“What's going on with the image?!”

Kotori’s shout reverberated throughout the command room, but to no avail, as Mukuro’s blurry image on both the screen and Shido’s googles vanished in the miscellaneous electromagnetic waves.

“Error! The automatic video camera isn't responding!”

“Kuh…did <Michael> seal it?”

Kotori recollected in detail the moments before the footage and sound were cut off. Mukuro had stuck her tongue out towards Kotori at that time. Hearing her words, Shidou removed his earpiece.

“I… I want to…”

Shidou weakly squeezed out from his now parched throat while tightly grasping his fist. But it was too late. Mukuro was already gone.

The mission to save Spirits had been initiated under Ratatoskr’s request; nevertheless, there was a feeling of hope that the Spirits could live a normal life. But have they ever lost their futures due to Shidou intervening? His heart felt uneasy. His arsenal descended with a clang.

“It hurts…”

Shidou wept with a pained expression. He turned around towards his sister, a look of resignation was painted on his face.

“What now...Kotori…?”

“Why are you giving up just because you couldn't convince her?”

Kotori mocked condescendingly. She sat back onto her commander chair and gestured Shidou to come over.

“Of course, her words aren't meaningless. But as meaningful as they are, abiding to them won't do any good.”

True, Spirits were existences which needed to be saved. They represent natural disasters in themselves; there was no reason to place them on Earth. But Shidou refused to accept such an unjust fact.

“But if I just sit here and do nothing, wouldn't that be worse than trying to talk to her?”

Kotori fiddled with the guilty pleasure in her mouth and responded.

“If only that was true; didn't Mukuro also mention DEM? Humans are all virtually the same to her. Even if we don't take care of her, DEM will.”

“Guuu….”

Shidou muttered in anguish. If he and the others were to cease coming into contact with Spirits due to their danger, that'd be nothing but a cruel joke. There wasn't any difference between that and Ratatoskr planning a physical attack. Realizing Shidou’s intention, Kotori pointed her lollipop at him.

“Now that DEM is aware of Mukuro’s presence, they'll undoubtedly dispatch assassins to murder her. If they succeed, her Sephira crystal would fall into Westcott’s hands. If they were to fail, she would suspend the Earth’s motion. Although we don't know which, both outcomes would spell the end of humanity.”

“When you put it that way…”

“The only way is for us to interact with Mukuro before she suffers another assault - that's all to it.”

Kotori’s words slapped some sense into her brother's mind.

“Aah, that's how it is… Sorry I wasn't thinking clearly.”

“Good. I can understand how you feel.”

Shidou could sense that too. Under the present circumstances, DEM couldn't simply ignore Mukuro. But that alone didn't contradict what she said.

If only DEM didn't exist.

If only we could lessen Mukuro’s burdens.

Kotori reached a conclusion. As if she perceived Shidou’s opinion, Kotori continued while staring into the distance.

“...Keep in mind. The Spirits that you saved by your own hand, at least they can stay here and live a happy life.”

“Ah, thank you Kotori.”

Shidou suppressed his urges to hug his sister on the spot. Now was not the time to stop his progress. Every single move they take henceforth could very well bring about serious damage to the world.

“Yeah, we can do this.”

“Un. You're right.”

At that moment, Reine emitted a dejected voice.

“...That determination may not last long.”

“Reine, what's the matter?” replied Kotori as she moved her line of sight.

“Take a look at this.”

Reine motioned towards a statistical table on the monitor. It appeared to display Mukuro’s happiness levels and mental state. Shidou couldn't help but take notice in an instant. The reason was simple.

The numerical values showed in the chart indicated absolutely zero deviation. There were only straight lines parallel to the abscissa and perpendicular to the ordinate.

“During Shin’s conversation with Mukuro, the monitor was connected continuously. Yet the affection levels, happiness measurements, and every other parameter remained constant. It looks like she wasn't joking when she said that she had sealed her heart.”

“W-wha…?”

Kotori widened her eyes in shock.

That was to be expected. To seal a Spirit's power, it was a necessary prerequisite for Shidou to kiss said Spirit. However, if the Spirit couldn't open the door to her heart, it was impossible for Shidou to seal her.

Although Mukuro had spoken to him in such a manner, her impression of Shidou stayed invariant. So far, he had been abhorred and detested by sorrowful Spirits before, but being treated like that by a deadpan Spirit was a first. It'd be a hassle to seal Spirits if this were to continue.

"Mukuro wields the angel <Michael> in the form of a key. You had witnessed one of its abilities just now - locking a target's will. If she used that on her own heart, any external influence would be rendered incapable of affecting her."

"Such a result… what should we—"

As Shidou began to utter something depressing, whispers could be heard from outside the door of the command headquarters.

"...? What's that sound?"

Kotori made a suspicion as she resolutely approached the door.

Kotori flung the door open the next instant. With a loud thud, the Spirits that were supposed to be waiting in another room surged inside altogether.

"Ugaaah!"

"Kyaaa!"

"Constriction. So heavy. Kaguya, you need to lose weight."

"Why should I!? It's not just me!"

Each and every one of them was entangled in a chaotic mess of bodies, sluggishly standing up. Shidou, looking at the present situation, couldn't help but speak.

"E-everyone…! What are you doing here?"

“Muuu…sorry. We didn't mean to eavesdrop…”

Tohka apologized dejectedly.

“It's not Tohka-san’s fault! Darling made us worry in these conditions!”

Miku made her accusation while holding onto Tohka’s shoulders. The other Spirits nodded in agreement.

“You guys…”

Kotori gave a sigh and made a facepalm. Origami, who was looking straightforwardly, moved her lips.

“Although we arrived halfway through, we still heard. There must be something we can do.”

Kotori covered her mouth in an *Oh* interjection. If possible, she'd like the Spirits to be as far away from danger as possible. As if they figured out what Kotori had in mind, the Spirits vociferated their opinions in quick succession.

“Won't the Earth be destroyed at this unwilling rate? I still want to read my favorite manga!”

“If Mukuro-san sees the beauty of this world, she wouldn't want to disrupt it! Please let us lend a hand!”

“Everyone…”

Kotori was overwhelmed by the momentum and turned towards Reine for advice.

“.....”

As Reine made a ‘go with the flow’ expression, Kotori yielded and exhaled.

“...Haah, I see. Alright, you can stay.”

Having received Kotori’s permission, the Spirits’ faces lit up with determination.

“But this time, we can't win with spirit power alone. If we can't boost her affection levels, we won't be able to seal her. Plus her heart is firmly locked.”

Kotori emphasized in a sincere tone.

“Enquiry. Is there any way to unlock Mukuro’s heart?”

As Yuzuru questioned to Reine, everyone focused their attention to her.

“...Although it's uncertain whether it’ll work or not, there is one method.”

“There is?!!”

Tohka couldn't believe what she heard, the other Spirits too following suit. Reine emanated a dispassionate aura.

“If her angel can lock her heart, then it can also unlock it. Mukuro has to use <Michael> once again.”

“That…”

Shidou lamented from the recesses of his throat. What Reine said was all true.

Angels possess miraculous forms and appearances. To undo an effect caused by an angel, its power must be used again. The problem was that, as its name states, <Seal Removing Lord> belonged to Mukuro. Due to her having sealed her heart, Shidou’s feelings and intentions were unable to touch her. It was as if he was trying to open a treasure chest with the key inside it.

Kaguya complacently puffed out her chest.

“Huhu, angels we have. I shall force her to open her heart

“Doubt. Mukuro is in space. How will you go there?”

Yuzuru, her counterpart, gave a retorting remark.

“Uhh… well…”

“Right.”

As Kaguya tried to think of a comeback, Shidou pondered as well. Like Yuzuru said, the location posed a problem too.

Shidou had employed a three-dimensional projection to converse with Mukuro, blithely thinking that it'd work. He didn't even have the means for step one.

However…

“Space….space huh…..”

Kotori brainstormed while playing with her lollipop until something popped up in her mind.

“The time is just right. Maybe there is a way.”

“Eh?”

Hearing her words full of self-confidence, Shidou was mind-blown.

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“——Total annihilation?!”

DEM Industries’ Japan branch’s communications room received a status report on the satellite tracking of the airships, Ellen gave out a shocked, terrified voice. Within the dark and gloomy space, there flickered a mere few light-emitting diodes of display screens that dimly illuminated the room. Ellen moved towards a pitch-black corner, gazing fixedly at the monitor which faintly resounded every now and then.

“...A fleet of three aerial warships and ninety <Bandersnatch> units and not a single scratch on the Spirit… plus the all-out frenzied retaliation on the ground surface.”

The trembling voice came from one of her subordinates through the communication device.

“—Marvelous.”

Westcott’s commanding voice reverberated from the back of the room.

“I never expected the vanguard troops to defeat her, but this power… such magnificent power… Excellent!”

As he continued his rumination, Ellen casted a glance at him askance, immersed in deep thought.

Although the tracker satellite, Dectas•NUMBER, hadn't participated in the battle, its assignment wasn't to capture the Spirit, but to clearly investigate the figure asleep amidst the cosmos. That way, they could force her down to Earth.

However, this operation ended in failure, epic failure. Not only that, but the wreckage was shot down as meteors worldwide. Ellen breathed out in displeasure. If this was to be the outcome, they should’ve let Ellen go in the first place.

“Is the Spirit still at its previous coordinates?”

“A-affirmative. The Spirit still remains under surveillance, but… I’m afraid it's preparing to launch another counterattack.”

“Hmm…”

Ellen groaned quietly. She lifted her head and looked towards Westcott.

“—Ellen.”

Realizing her intention, Westcott severely nodded his head.

“Ah, it'll be troublesome if holes keep being chiseled into DEM’s facilities. I’ll leave it to you and Artemisia. I look forward to your results.”

“Yes, definitely.”

Ellen answered briefly before she saluted and left the communications room.

——After Ellen exited.

“...About that, Managing Director Westcott,”

One of the wizards there called out to him with utmost caution.

“Hm? What is it?”

“Is it really okay to let chief executive Mathers to go to space…?”

“Yes. Are you saying that my decision is mistaken?”

Westcott intently stared at the pitiful wizard, like a predator hunting its prey. The unfortunate girl’s facial expression instantly paled, and she hurriedly shook her head in subordination.

“N-n-no! T-that's not what I meant! Will chief executive Mathers still fight when she finds out about that thing…”

The wizard muttered in a feeble voice as Westcott shrugged his shoulders.

“Ah~, that's right. That's how it should be.” Westcott uncovered his right hand and a black levitating tome materialized, <Beelzebub>. As he shifted his vision to the manuscript, new lines of words began to form - about the recent Spirit and how to capture her.

“I expect a lot from you, Ellen. But for a long time, you wouldn’t want to avoid getting yourself bathed in blood from head to toe.”

Westcott finished as he indifferently let out a laugh.

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The muffled noise of rotating propellers and consecutive oscillations vibrated throughout Shidou’s body and eardrums. His current location was not the command room of the temporary subterranean facility under Tenguu city, but in an enormous carrier helicopter. Of course, he wasn't without company. In front of him was a long row of Spirits and Ratatoskr’s crew.

“Naa, Kotori, where are we going?”

Shidou interrogated the person in question, their commander. During the several hours in route, Shidou and the other Spirits couldn't obtain any information and sat dumbfounded. To tell the truth, being taken anywhere had always felt rather anxious to him. The Spirits, such as Tohka and Kaguya, who were riding such a huge helicopter as passengers for the first time, took pleasure in it.

Although Kotori had noticed Shidou’s concern, she simply swayed the treat in her mouth.

“Sorry, but I can't reveal any details. Though I don't doubt you, but the place we're heading to now is known to be Ratatoskr’s technological center.”

“Will we find a method to reach Mukuro there?”

“Yeah. I think we should be arriving soon—” A message was then broadcasted inside the aircraft.

“Commander, we're arriving at our destination. Please prepare for landing.”

“Ara, looks like there's a timer in my body,
”
She then issued instructions to her crew.

After a few moments, the helicopter’s shaking came to a stop and its rear hatch sprang open, accompanied with an electronic tone.

“Good work. This way please.”

The person who urged them seemed to be one of the staff members. Shidou and the others blinked their eyes in confusion and chased after Kotori, who had already exited the aircraft.

“This place…”

Shidou did a quick sweep of his surroundings and pursed his eyebrows. The spaciousness all around the helicopter had exceeded his expectations.

Naturally, Shidou couldn't imagine the room precisely as he had never been there before, but thought it was some sort of hangar. In front of him lay a gigantic wall which towered over everything else in the commodious room. Shidou couldn't even get a

glimpse of the ceiling when he gazed upwards. There was a number of mechanics working on various kinds of appliances and deployments, each occupied with their respective jobs.

“A warehouse…?”

“Well it's that sort of place. Follow me.”

Kotori gave that instruction with a tap of her boots. Afterwards, Ratatoskr’s crew ensued behind her. For some reason, Shidou recalled a scene from a TV drama of a hospital director’s consulting room.

“Shidou, we should go too,”

“Ah yeah.”

Heading Tohka’s reminder, Shidou followed them. The other Spirits looked left and right, and reached what looked like the entrance to the warehouse.

“Here it is.”

Kotori said as she aimed her gaze at the others and placed her hand onto the installation beside the door.

After a tiny beep was sounded, the large door started to unravel its hinges. The interior shined onto their eyes blindingly.

“...This is…!” The Spirits behind Shidou were also stunned by the light.

“Uoohh…!”

“Kaka, I see. This may just work.”

“Uwaah~... What is this plaything? Imouto-chan, can I take a picture for material? Just one!”

“Of course not. This is highly classified,”

Kotori replied half-heartedly to the excited Nia. Although her words were understandable, Shidou too thought the same way when he looked at that for the first time. He inhaled deeply and stared at the object before him.

The door had broadened into a warehouse as he had anticipated, but what lay inside was not another helicopter. It was a giant warship. Although it may not be one, to Shidou it was a warship.

The sharp pointed body of the vessel composed of white and colored glaze, and the cannon was mounted at the center. Extensive protrusions jutted out of the rear section like branches on a tree, and the few sheets of metallic foliage diffused a brilliant hue. The warship itself had a rather unusual design for its exterior.

But that was normal. After all, the ship wasn't going to sail the roaring sea, rather it was going to fly in the heavenly skies.

“Fraxinus…!”

Shidou called its name as his body quivered.

Ratatoskr’s prided warship, Fraxinus. The airship, which had sustained critical damage during the fight against Inverse Origami; and hence forth was in overhaul, was now intact before them.

Shidou brushed away that notion. The airship in front of him was indeed Fraxinus, but he felt that there was a discrepancy with the original in appearance.

“It looks… different?”

Shidou soliloquized as Kotori proudly gave out a humph.

“I see you've noticed. Correct, this is a brand new model upgraded with Ratatoskr’s most advanced Realizer unit, and overall performance improvements. Its name is Fraxinus-EX!”

As Kotori announced this loudly, her vice commander, Kannazuki Kyouhei, spread both his hands and feet and adopted a thumbs up gesture. The other crew members symmetrically stood to his left and right. The final member, Reine, fished out a multicolored piece of paper from her pocket, casting a blank expression.

“E-EX?”

“Yes. Although Fraxinus’ damage was caused by the battle with Origami, it was also mercilessly wrecked by Ellen Mathers’ Goetia in the previous world, so merely repairing it wouldn't be enough. It took quite some time too,”

Kotori said that in a self-deprecating tone.

Shidou reminisced the time when he returned to the past and altered history with the help of Tokisaki Kurumi’s power. In that previous world, Fraxinus had been utterly defeated by DEM’s warship.

“So that's how it is. We can reach Mukuro with this.”

“That's right. We'll fly over.”

Kotori summarized as she threw an imaginary paper plane.

“It’ll take a while before takeoff since the ship needs some final adjustments but we can board now. —Follow me, there's someone who wants to see you.” Kotori beckoned for her brother to come over using her finger. Shidou couldn't help but feel odd.

“Someone wants to see me?”

“Yeah. Well you’ve met each other in normal circumstances many times before, but this should be the first time you’ve seen her here.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“You’ll know soon. Come fast.”

Kotori ordered as she approached Fraxinus.

“Uuuu… who wants to meet Shidou?”

“Not sure…”

Shidou let out a perplexed expression as he, the other Spirits, and the ship’s crew followed behind Kotori.

After she ensured that everyone had assembled under the airship, Kotori raised her head and yelled.

“Alright. Please proceed.”

As soon as Kotori’s voice reached Shidou and the others, an undulating radiance engulfed their bodies and an unthinkable feeling of levitation lifted them upwards. The next instant, everyone's view transformed from the warehouse into the interior of the airship.

“Uoohh…”

Fraxinus’ teleporter utilized its own Realizer unit to function. Although Shidou had experienced this countless of times, he still couldn't help but feel startled since he hadn't gone through it for a long time. He exhaled deeply to recover his palpitation and observed his surroundings. The bridge was subdivided into two sections, with the commander's seat right in the middle. The rest consisted of the crew’s stations and their respective automation consoles along with their display screens in front of them. Compared to the old Fraxinus, there was a bit more space available and the quantity of display screens increased as well. But there was one more difference which caught his attention.

“So we can directly teleport to the bridge now eh…”

Shidou noted as he looked under his feet. He and the others were at the entrance of the bridge, and a platform which seemed to be a transport terminal was beneath them. Shidou recalled that previously it was located in the lower part of the warship and he needed to travel a considerable distance to arrive at the bridge.

“Yeah. Now that there are various terminals installed all over the airship, destinations can be freely chosen. So you can now teleport here directly from the residential area instantly.”

“I see. Then who did you say wanted to see me?”

Shidou enquired as he searched the interior. Although he thought that the teleport operator would be in the room, there wasn't even a single shadow of a person. Kotori ridiculed evilly.

“Hello. Long time no see, Fraxinus.”

Kotori yelled as if she was conversing with either herself or the vessel.

Then...

『Yes, it has been a long time, Kotori.』

A girl's voice came abruptly from the monitor's audio amplifier, and it was accompanied by a faint glow.

"Waa?!"

Shidou retreated back a step owing to the suddenness and a look of astonishment formed on the other Spirits' faces.

"W-what's going on?!"

"That frightened… me."

『Your reaction lacks manners, Shidou. There would be a penalty if you speak to a Spirit that way.』

Shidou was dumbstruck for an airship to preach him like that and gazed around in confusion.

"T-this is…"

"What are you making a fuss about, Shidou? She has always taken care of you. She's Fraxinus' Artificial Intelligence. After the recent update, the AI can now interchange dialogues with you,"

Kotori explained as the speaker continued.

『Good morning. Long time no see—this is becoming repetitive… I have always kept an eye on you. My name is Maria. Please take good care of me from now on, Shidou.』

Shidou felt rather intrigued by her voice and answered with an earnest smile.

"Aah~, please take care of me too, Maria."

Simultaneously, the Spirits behind Shidou swarmed, squeezing in front of the display screen. Of course, there couldn't be Maria's face on the monitor but it did display the letters 'MARIA'. It was very lifelike.

"Ooh! Very well done! How did you do this?"

"Ehh so there was something like this!"

"This voice will read out the options? Is it real?"

All the Spirits encircled the small Maria and made all sorts of comments. Looking at them, Kotori was utterly helpless with the situation and simply clapped her hands.

"Settle down, don't make Maria feel uncomfortable. She still has a job to do."

Kotori waited until everyone calmed down before asking Maria.

"How long till the warship can take off?"

『The entire maintenance will take approximately 90 more minutes.』

"There's no time. Get it done within an hour."

"As merciless as always… I pity your future husband."

"Even though the airship is new, your jokes are as disappointing as ever. Resume maintenance after this battle is over,"

Kotori gave the command as she narrowed her eyes. Conversely, Maria began conversing with the crew as if she didn't understand the syntax of her command.

『Although the data settings for the automation consoles and display screens are default, everyone please confirm preparation for all contingencies. The execution of the current task shall be synchronized here.』

The ship's crew nodded one after another and Maria renewed her explanation.

『In addition, please keep the personal articles held in the bridge to a minimum. Although interference is unwanted due to this being categorized as individual space, in

my opinion <Nail Knocker> and <Dimension Breaker> carry unnecessary items in the bridge.』

Hearing Maria's words, <Nail Knocker> Shiizaki and <Dimension Breaker> Nakatsugawa exposed a stupefied expression.

"H-how…"

"Wasn't it fine before!?"

『Previously I had no means of speech. If you feel that these items are absolutely necessary, please submit your reason(s) in no more than 1200 words.』

"T-these are for cursing enemies when they appear!"

"I'm unable to work at 100% efficiency when I'm not with my wives."

『Denied.』

『Denied.』

Maria coldly rejected their requests. Shiizaki and Nakatsugawa both wailed, "Noooooo!"

The other crew members watched their two colleagues' embarrassment. <Boss> Mikimoto, <Bad Marriage> Kawagoe, and <Deep Love> Minowa laughed heartily.

"Can't do anything about that. Those items are indeed inessential for work purposes."

"Aah, we had thought so too from long ago."

"Public and private affairs should be clearly differentiated."

『Also, private phone calls to wives or daughters in shops are no longer permitted hereafter. Please forgive any inconvenience caused. That includes sending automatic cameras to boyfriends or girlfriends.』

『Eh?』

The other three crew members were dumbstruck by Maria’s regulations. Seeing their responses, Kotori’s veins popped out of her forehead.

“You guys…. how dare you use Fraxinus’ equipment on those kinds of stuff?!”

“A- no- that-”

“You're mistaken! We usually handle our assignments seriously…”

The crew tried to provide an explanation with incoherent words. Kotori sighed as she saw them in such an unpalatable state.

“The point is—there's not much time. Let's just concentrate on getting the maintenance over with, Maria.”

Receiving Kotori’s command, the ship’s crew gave a salute and shouted ‘Roger!’ in unison.

“Next, we should…”

『That said, there's a person who wishes to speak to Kotori at the base. What do you think? 』

“Speak with me? Who?”

『About that, it's Elliot Woodman-sama.』

Maria’s reply dazed Kotori.

◇◇◇

Shidou, after exiting Fraxinus, returned to the corridor.

The airship’s crew was currently in the bridge and occupied with the final adjustments to Fraxinus. And now there stood only Shidou and the Spirits, with Kotori as their leader.

“...Shidou, Shidou.”

Tohka was calling from behind him.

“Un, what is it, Tohka?” Shidou turned around to face her.

“Who's this Woodman guy? Kotori seems to respect him a lot.”

Shidou directed his sight towards Kotori. Indeed, after Maria had mentioned that name, Kotori immediately flustered, wearing the overcoat on her shoulders properly and buttoning it up neatly. Kotori’s head didn't turn back but she explained while she kept walking.

“Woodman-sama is the chairman of Ratatoskr’s board of directors. He's essentially the very top of the organization and also its founder. Without him, Ratatoskr wouldn't exist.”

“.....!”

Shidou twitched his eyebrows as he heard this.

Shidou recollected a verse which Mukuro had spoken before, ‘What doth thou, nay, thine aristocrats fore mind?’ He didn't doubt the integrity of Ratatoskr, but felt offended even though he had decided to pull himself together. Perhaps it was because he couldn't refute Mukuro’s statement that time.

Then, Shidou noticed that Nia, who was walking beside him, bore a complicated expression on her face.

“Nia? What's wrong? You look scary.”

“.....!”

Nia jumped due to Shidou’s sudden call.

“Hm? Ahaha, it's nothing. As for you, Boy, since when did you level up to the extent that you can now detect slight changes?”

“Hey…”

Shidou smiled wryly in response. Nia’s face suddenly turned grave and she whispered seriously.

“It feels like I’ve heard the name Woodman before.”

“Eh?”

Just as Shidou attempted to question her further about the matter, Kotori stopped right before a door. After pressing the intercom beside the door and informing of her presence, Kotori turned the doorknob.

“Alright. Come in.”

“E-excuse us.”

Shidou and the others disorderedly entered the room, being hastened by Kotori. The overall layout of the room resembled that of a private study which accepted innumerable books and other works of literature, bookshelves placed together side by side. The atmosphere of the chamber when compared to the previous machinery facility was as different as black and white.

In the innermost part of the room, the silhouettes of two people could be seen behind a massive business table. One of them was a man who looked to be over fifty years old, sitting on a wheelchair. He wore green colored thin frame eyeglasses and tied his rather lengthy hair into a single bundle, while emanating a gentle impression. Beside him stood a woman who also had glasses on and wore Western-style clothes, while maintaining an upright posture.

“Eh?”

“Muu?”

Shidou and Tohka couldn't help but knit their eyebrows when they saw the couple - they had met before. It was some time before Natsumi appeared; a foreign man on a wheelchair had exchanged some words with Shidou and Tohka when they were taking a walk.

“Mr. Baldwin?”

As Shidou exasperated the name, the man let out a mischievous expression fitting of his age.

“Yaa~, long time no see. The girl over there too, it’s good to see that you're in good health. Allow me to reintroduce myself. My name is Elliot Baldwin Woodman,”

The man addressed Shidou and Tohka, who both had their mouths wide open.

“.....! Woodman-sama, have you met them before?”

As Kotori was taken aback, Woodman simply winked an eye.

“During my visit to Tenguu city.”

“What if something were to have happened to you?!”

“Haha, forgive me. I’ll be more careful in the future.”

Woodman responded without the slightest regret. Kotori sighed, and placed her hand on her forehead. Although he had heard from her before, Shidou didn't expect the man to be this straightforward. As he was thinking of that, Woodman’s expression turned solemn and faced Shidou in seriousness.

“Well then, forgive me for summoning you here. We were supposed to visit you instead.”

“No need to be so formal, please,”

Shidou said as Woodman closed his eyes.

“First of all, I am very grateful and I thank you for your efforts in saving the Spirits.”

“Eh… ah... You're welcome.”

Shidou equivocated while scratching his cheeks. He felt rather puzzled, being thanked so specially.

“About that, we feel the same. Without Ratatoskr, I wouldn't even be aware of the existence of Spirits and everyone would still be suffering from DEM’s and AST’s attacks. The very thought of that makes me feel unhappy,”

Shidou added before continuing.

“Being able to help Kotori when she was transformed into a Spirit by <Phantom> five years ago, I appreciate it.”

Shidou earnestly bowed with respect.

Woodman nodded in acknowledgement and fixed his eyes onto Shidou’s.

“In that case, I would also like to apologize for getting you involved in the matter concerning <Dáinsleif> last time. I will strictly give orders so that such a problem will never occur again.”

“Ah…”

<Dáinsleif>. Hearing this term, Kotori’s eyebrows evidently twitched for a moment. Although Shidou himself doesn't have any memory of the incident, that term was indeed used as the codename for the special-purpose weaponry which would be used to destroy him, a precaution readied by Ratatoskr. According to Kotori’s explanation after the commotion had ended, the weapon was activated without authorization by one of the members of the board of directors.

“No, even though I do feel somewhat conflicted, I think such a precaution is indispensable in the event that I lose control. And even if you had informed me beforehand, I’d still choose to save the Spirits.”

“Shidou…”

Tohka’s voice was glad but she also worried for Shidou. He smiled and softly stroked her hair. Shidou was able to save Tohka and the other Spirits. The tactile impression that he could perceive from the palm of his hand allowed Shidou to firmly believe that he was doing the right thing.

However.

“.....” Shidou’s heart still felt unconvinced somewhere - Mukuro’s words. He flashed through his mind, not realizing that he had opened his mouth subconsciously.

“Umm… May I ask a question?”

“What question?”

“I’m thankful for it, but why does Ratatoskr want to save Spirits?”

“...Oh?”

Woodman slightly inclined his head to Shidou’s question.

“Are you unsatisfied or confused with something?”

“No! I just mind about something, you see…”

As if he was instantly seen through, Shidou waved his hands helter-skelter. Origami then picked up his words for him.

“Regarding that matter, I too admit that Ratatoskr is an organization devoted to saving Spirits and I'm very grateful for that. Nevertheless, is there something hidden behind our backs? Even if you have a grand budget for expenditure why do you still save Spirits?”

Woodman nodded as if he already knew their intentions and started to speak.

“I can understand your misgivings. Indeed, Ratatoskr, as an organization, is overly caring for you Spirits. I don't blame you if you feel that it's unreasonable.”

Woodman verbalized as he forcefully grinned.

“This is a bit baffling. I’m afraid I can't say a reason easy for you to understand.”

“...What do you mean?”

“To save Spirits. That is my greatest goal.”

“.....”

Origami puckered up her eyebrows. The next moment, Nia, who was on the opposite side of the room, opinionated in sync with Origami.

“Are you a little over your head with that noble sage attitude? As they say, you can't expect everyone to be squeaky clean. Don't you feel that this is a bit suspicious?”

Nia’s manner of speech at that time was not her older sister tone, but somewhat acrimonious and fierce. Her current air caused Shidou to shudder in fear.

“Nia…?”

Alas, she turned a deaf ear and kept her piercing eyes on Woodman, continuing her demanding demeanor.

“Woodman. Elliot Baldwin Woodman. That's your name right?”

“Aah~, that’s correct.”

“Then let me ask you again. —As one of the original founders of DEM Industries, thirty years ago when you caused the appearance of the First Spirit. Why do you still hide your identity and spout these high-sounding words?”

“W-Wha…?”

Shidou and the other Spirits, without exception, all caught a breath of cold air after hearing Nia’s shocking revelation.

“W-what’s going on, Nia?? Mr. Woodman is a part of DEM…? And what do you mean by causing a Spirit to appear?”

Shidou asked with all the more uncertainty. Nia coldly turned her head and answered him.

“Yes. A month ago, when my <Rasiel> was still in perfect condition, I had the chance to investigate, -investigate the state of affairs of this world when the First Spirit appeared.”

“.....?! W-what did you say?”

“It was at that time when I found out. —Isaac Ray Pelham Westcott, Ellen Mira Mathers, and… Elliot Baldwin Woodman. As the three founding members of DEM Industries, they had the utmost involvement in the appearance of the First Spirit.”

As Nia said this provocatively, Woodman gently sighed and began to speak.

“I see… so your angel <Rasiel> knows everything already. I do not wish to painstakingly conceal this, but now should be a good time. Yes, I once caused the appearance of the First Spirit in this world together with Ike- Westcott and Ellen.”

“.....”

Shidou felt his breathing was clogged. Knowing that Woodman was once partners with his two most hated enemies was already overwhelming, but to think that he also brought about the existence of Spirits…

“Aah~, by the way, I haven't introduced her to you yet. The person beside me is Karen. She's one of the members who left DEM with me.”

Woodman acquainted as if he just remembered the fact. The woman, who appeared to be his secretary, stood by him and nodded.

“My name is Karen Nora Mathers. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Ahh~, Hello… eh? Hm?”

While he exchanged amenities with the opposite party, Shidou unexpectedly took notice of her name; he had heard it before somewhere.

“Mathers…?”

“Yes. Ellen Mathers is my sister.”

“EHHHHHH?!”

Suddenly realizing such an impactful detail, Shidou and the Spirits all yelled altogether.

“T-t-that Ellen…!?”

“Predicament. You do look familiar though.”

“T-this sisterly development?!”

“Miku STOP your deep breathing!”

Natsumi advised as she saw Miku immersed in chaos.

“Alright, calm down.”

Miku honestly nodded her head. After the instruction, Miku grabbed both Natsumi's arms and plunged her head into her unkempt hair while inhaling profusely. Natsumi struggled with her four limbs to resist Miku as if her life depended on it, but to no avail. Confronting Miku's unimaginable warmhearted bear hug, her thin arms were incapable of any resistance and Natsumi ultimately chose to accept her dire fate, losing strength from head to toe.

Shidou quietly relaxed and placed his hand on his chest as he observed Karen's facial features. Excluding the spectacles and increasing the length of her hair, she did look exactly alike with that wizard. It's just that Ellen being the older one looked to not even be in her twenties; whereas Karen being the younger one seemed well over twenty.

On the other hand, there were more pressing matters that required clarification so Shidou calmed down and turned towards Woodman.

"A-anyway, what did you mean by causing Spirits to appear? How?"

"Let's discuss that in proper order. I'll answer Itsuka Shidou's and Tobiichi Origami's queries first."

Woodman glanced in Origami's direction and continued.

"As Nia had initially mentioned, I am one of the founders of DEM. Originally I had similar intentions to Westcott, and wanted to harness the power of Spirits."

"....."

Shidou tensed up and swallowed his saliva. For the head of an organization which saves Spirits to say those kinds of words was truly shocking.

"However, when I first met with the First Spirit, I changed my ideas. Abandoning my original goal, I left DEM Industries and established Ratatoskr. I made up my mind to protect the Spirits with my life, even if it meant that I had to renounce my old friends and comrades."

"...What was the outcome?"

Woodman shrugged his shoulders and made a gentle expression.

"—I fell in love with her."

His unexpected reply made Shidou widen his eyes in disbelief.

“F-fell in love?”

“Aah~, the First Spirit stole my heart the moment I met her and I became restless with anxiety. I couldn't let anyone exploit her power for their selfish purposes.”

Woodman confessed with an eager intonation of a love struck teenage boy.

“Therefore I couldn't stand for other Spirits like her to suffer or live in misery. Although this idiocy may perhaps make people burst into laughter, this reason is my one and only reason as to why I want to save Spirits.”

“.....”

Shidou was speechless, numb in his position. He didn't plan on invading his privacy any further, but Woodman’s statement felt somewhat unverifiable. Shidou shook his head.

“I don't think that it's a foolish reason,”

Shidou replied as he moved forward a step.

“It'd be better to say that I share your opinions, Ratatoskr’s founder.”

Woodman was surprised at Shidou’s comment and regained his composure.

“Thanks, you have a kind heart. I'm happy to see that you're the one sealing Spirits.”

“Ahh, you're welcome,”

Shidou responded while waving his hand. Origami, who was listening to their conversation, let out a wondrous expression and shifted her view to Karen.

“—So what's your reason for following him and defecting from DEM?”

“I fell in love with Elliot.”

“....Ahem?!”

Shidou coughed at the unanticipated statement.

“...It's like that…? But Mr. Woodman has already… with the First Spirit…”

“I'm not giving up if he already likes someone else. If he changes his mind and there's no one else, wouldn't he have no other choice?”

“T-that’s not wrong…”

“Speaking of greedy desires, I would very much like to undergo reproductive activities with Elliot and conceive his child. Although I highly respect Elliot’s wishes, it would be a great loss for the world if his bloodline ends.”

“.....?! Ha…..”

Shidou was having a hard time accepting such a barefaced statement and felt awkward as he heard her words. Woodman forced a smile.

“Haha… this is quite bothersome.”

“Elliot, no need to trouble yourself, I’ll wait for the right moment.”

“I concur. I admire and acclaim your sublime determination.”

“I should be the one thanking you. You're the third person to endorse it.”

Karen supported as she shook hands with Origami.

“.....”

It looks like they've entered waters uncharted for Shidou, as he couldn't keep up with their ideals. Although it vaguely insinuated a morality crisis, Shidou decided to leave them be after they had befriended each other with great difficulty. Woodman propped up his glasses and straightened his body.

“Forgive me, Itsuka Shidou. Can you come closer so I can see you? Recently my sight has diminished greatly.”

“Eh? Okay.”

Shidou advanced towards Woodman, who attentively examined his face, murmuring something inaudible.

“I see… you do look familiar—with the boy from then…”

As Woodman muttered to himself, Shidou couldn't help but purse his eyebrows.

“The boy from then? Who—”

At that moment, an intense vibration raided the room.

“Uwaaah…?!”

“Ooohh?!”

“Hyaaa!”

As if an explosive had detonated nearby, the walls, floor and ceilings all violently shook. The books on the shelves were tumbling down onto the floor altogether.

“Is everyone alright?” checked Shidou.

“Umuu… what happened?!” replied Tohka.

“Could it be…Mukuro-san?”

Yoshino gave out a timid voice.

“Another meteor?”

Yoshinon, the puppet on her left hand, used both hands to cover its head in dismay. Kotori shook her head with alertness.

“No… this is…”

A flurried radio broadcast sounded within the room as if in response to Kotori.

“Woodman-sama! Emergency!”

“Calm down, what's the matter?”

“A surprise attack! Aerial warship confirmed above the base! It's… DEM!!”

“Wha….?!”

Shidou shuddered at the warning.

“DEM… Really, they even discovered this place…”

Kotori stated before pausing in route as she remembered something important. Concealment meant nothing now.

“<Beelzebub>…! Of course, the omniscient Demon King <Beelzebub>.”

Nia swallowed and smiled sarcastically.

“...Probably. Even though its search function was obstructed, I can't do anything about what happened before that.”

“Kuh… so they finally came. Searching for this particular location, I guess the enemy is targeting Fraxinus now…”

Kotori faced Woodman.

“Your orders, Woodman-sama.”

“..Hm.”

Woodman racked his brain for a countermeasure against their current situation and lifted his head up.

“Let's get moving first. We're sitting ducks if this place has already been discovered,” waved Woodman.

“Commander Itsuka, take the Spirits to Fraxinus at once and hurry to <Zodiac>. She'll definitely be saved.”

“Understood, I’ll make sure that they get there. But…what about you?”

As Kotori made a worried expression, Woodman alleviated his expression.

“Karen and I will use an alternate route. Can't let Westcott destroy this facility, after all. I have something to take care of afterwards. My two legs would burden you anyway.”

Woodman lightly tapped his legs.

“But!”

Kotori refuted grievously while tightly grasping her fist.

“Its fine, my escape route has already been established so don't worry. This life won't die that easily. I've already decided to die holding my loving girl’s hand.”

Woodman winked his eye.

“Mr. Woodman…”

Shidou whispered in a low voice, as Karen fixed her eyeglasses.

“My hand is empty, you know.”

“I can't have someone as talented and splendid as you dying here with me.”

Woodman shrugged his shoulders as Karen exuded a lonesome but happy to be praised expression.

“Go now, Commander Itsuka. I wish you good luck,”

As Woodman gave his order, Kotori hesitated for a few seconds before finally bowing to her superior.

“...Understood. Please be safe.”

Woodman nodded and Kotori began issuing instructions to Shidou and the others.

“Let's go everyone, don't let Fraxinus fall into the enemy's hands again!”

Kotori’s every movement was filled with a sense of obligation. But behind her firm resolution, she faintly trembled. That was natural, as with danger there was doubt.
However, Kotori, as Ratatoskr’s commander, couldn't openly display such apprehensions. Shidou prepared himself for the worst and nodded in agreement.

“Aah, let's be quick.”

“Umu, fast!”

“Yes…”

The Spirits all agreed, and Shidou exchanged glances with Kotori for a moment. Without any prior consultation, they bade farewell to Woodman respectfully and brought everyone out of the room. As they ran through the corridor with all the agility they could muster, the sounds of detonations and Territories being breached ceaselessly resonated throughout.

“Kuh… what in the world invaded this place?!”

“I'm not sure, but we can affirm it through the airship—”

Unaware of how long they had traversed the passageway, Kotori’s voice was interrupted as the wall in front of them cracked open.

“Uaahh?!”

“Wha…”

Concrete debris flew randomly all over the air and diffused white smoke. Amidst the cloudy suspension, a distorted humanoid figure appeared. Mechanical limbs with a metallic texture, a simple eye embedded in the center of its head and sharp talons arranged regularly on its rigid arms. Like it was hunting prey, the robotic figure slowly entered.

“...<Bandersnatch>!”

Shidou shouted while gnashing his teeth. That monstrosity was the name of DEM’s unmanned weaponry, <Bandersnatch>. The camera on its head turned towards Shidou’s direction.

“.....!”

“Move away, Shidou!”

As Origami’s voice came, she released a ray of blinding light past Shidou’s hair.

“Uoohh…?!”

Permeated thoroughly by an intense light ray of Spirit power, the Bandersnatch instantly lost its functionality. Shidou looked behind him and an angel in the form of feathers was already floating there - Origami’s <Metatron>.

“T-thanks, Origami.”

Hearing Shidou’s gratitude, Origami nodded with self-satisfaction.

But now was not the time to rest. The combat all around them had not stopped yet. If their location was already breached, then there's no guarantee that Fraxinus’ warehouse is safe.

“Anyway let's hurry, there isn't much time—”

Shidou stopped his sentence, unwillingly.

Suddenly…

An unexpected voice sounded from in front of them.

“——Oya~, I didn't expect to see you here.”

“Wha….?!”

Shidou furrowed his eyebrows as he heard that ice cold voice which was inharmonious with the current situation.

Lingering amidst the white smoke was a man wearing black Western-style clothes and a wizard equipped with a CR-unit. The two leisurely walked out of the mist.

“Westcott?!”

There was no mistaking it, the head of DEM Industries and Shidou’s archenemy - Isaac Westcott.

“.....”

“What?!”

Witnessing his physique reveal itself from within the smokescreen, expressions of rage, ire, fury and the like formed on the Spirits’ faces. When ascertaining the enemy's advancements, one would not allow his or her leader to strike first. But Westcott had let Ellen do all the work.

However, Westcott was an eminent adversary that did not permit any shred of hesitation. The man who stood before them was completely different compared to himself one month ago. What were they supposed to do—.

“—Metatron.”

Dense light rays of spirit power elongated towards Westcott like previously on Origami’s command, ripping apart Shidou’s train of thought. Just before the piercing radiance impaled Westcott, an unadorned book page manifested in front of him and dissipated the energy in midair.

“Westcott-sama!”

“Are you hurt…?”

The wizard beside him gave out a distressed voice. Westcott objected and nodded eloquently.

“Such an unmitigated attack, excellent!”

“...Damn,” cursed Origami remorsefully. Westcott merely grinned mockingly and raised his hand.

“What a pity. A limited Astral dress’ angel cannot harm me in my current state.” Following his motions, a book which emitted an ominous aura materialized in his hand.

“—Beelzebub.”

“.....!”

Shidou gasped in fear and trepidation. <Beelzebub>, the omniscient Demon King, which Westcott had plundered from Nia. Sensing the impending danger, the Spirits called forth their limited Astral Dresses one after another.

“Ha!”

Accompanying the pale shine of the Astral Dresses was an angel in the form of a gigantic sword in Tohka’s grip, <Sandalphon>. The girl charged forward in an attempt to slay Westcott. The wizard defending him heaved her sabre while leaping to meet the attack head on.

“Gu…”

“Don't block me!”

The edges of the swords clashed and diffused through the angel. The wizard expanded her Territory’s strength in response, but was sent flying and crashed towards the wall.

“Hu….”

“.....!”

The wizard cried in agony as Tohka changed her target to Westcott. Although the man was presently engaged in battle, he simply sneered derisively.

“How valorous, <Princess>. What a waste, although I appreciate your combat-stricken welcome, I’m not after you today.”

“What are you talking about? You think you can escape?”

“Haha, who said anything about escaping? Though leaving you be would be rather vexatious…”

As Westcott grinned in a bewitching manner, his hand began to wander atop the book.

“Just a little should be fine. Show me what you're capable of.”

Westcott chanted to the book.

“<Beelzebub>, <Ashufiriya -Phantom Library>.”

“..Tohka!”

Shidou shouted unbearably. Although he was unaware of what happened, Shidou felt a sensation as if dozens of ice thorns pricked his back. The next instant, the space under Tohka's feet distorted into a shadowy book crevice.

"Wha—"

Tohka inhaled a breath of chilled air and retreated backwards at full speed. But it was too late. The enormous book snapped its pages shut, entrapping Tohka inside like a bookmark.

"Tohka!"

Shidou yelled as he jumped to her rescue. Before his hand could even reach the book, Tohka had already disappeared into the void. But it wasn't finished yet.

"Yaaa…!"

"W-what's this?!"

The other Spirits mourned lamentably while Shidou turned to face them. Similar books had appeared behind and under them and began to suck them in.

"Kuh…!"

"Damn, <Rasiel>….!"

"Everyone, run!" shouted Shidou, albeit uselessly. The books that had appeared in the corridor trapped the Spirits one by one.

"W-waa, help!"

"S-Shidou!"

The cries of the Spirits reverberated throughout the place as the books swallowed them and vanished. Witnessing everything helplessly, Shidou was petrified and glared at Westcott.

"....You evil bastard!! Where did you take them?!!"

“Hahaha, don't be so agitated. You'll reunite with them soon enough.” Westcott stirred up the corners of his mouth. At that moment, Westcott administered the merciless coup de grace.

“U-uaahh!?”

“I’ll leave you for after I deal with Elliot. During that time, feel free to worry to your heart’s content… in that illusory world.”

Westcott enunciated as he unhurriedly closed Shidou’s entrapment.

“Hm… it doesn't feel very exhausting even though this is the first time I've ever used this power.”

Westcott inferred while fiddling with a page from Beelzebub, realizing why he could decipher unwritten records.

“Westcott-sama…”

His bodyguard wizard who was previously knocked down by Tohka returned to his side and apologized.

“Forgive me, I was careless…”

“It doesn't matter. I obtained the opportunity to experiment with Beelzebub’s power anyway.”

Westcott grinned, dumbfounding the wizard.

“Then, where did the Spirits go?”

“Aah~...”

Westcott’s sight fell onto a page from <Beelzebub>, raising the corners of his mouth.

“Now, within a fairytale… struggling in fantasy.”

“Fairytale…?”

The wizard inclined her head. Well, she couldn't understand directly. Humans other than Westcott had no need to fathom a Demon King. He closed Beelzebub and diverted the topic of conversation.

“Rather than that, our target takes precedence at the moment. I look forward to meeting my old friend in person,”

As Westcott commanded, the wizard promptly saluted in response.

◇◇◇

Chapter 4 - Fairy tale

“...Uh, eh…”

Shidou groaned softly yet articulately while peeking through his fuzzy eyes. It was difficult to distinguish whether reality was blurred or if the blur was reality.

Shidou meticulously rubbed his eyes in order to restore his distorted vision, and the hazy scenery gradually clarified.

“.....?”

However, an abnormal discordant sensation ensued as the appearance of his periphery became clear. It was as if Shidou was reclining on a bed-like structure, although the encompassing space was obviously an unfamiliar place for him.

“Where is… this place…?”

Shidou furrowed his brows as he propped his body up with a rustle. It would appear that the piece of furniture he was surreptitiously lying on was made of interwoven rice straws. On closer inspection, the weathered housing, which Shidou had found himself in, was likewise made out of similar material - the tatterdemalion walls and ceiling, every ramshackle nook and corner.

“This is….”

Shidou’s shoulders abruptly shuddered.

Just a few moments ago, he was inside Ratatoskr’s secret warehouse being engulfed within the pages of a book on Westcott’s discretion.

“Am I… inside a story…?”

Shidou’s expression distorted with bewilderment as he sluggishly left the obsolete bed. Something was wrong. His body felt seemingly deteriorated as his movements were somehow less nimble. Shidou doubtfully gazed upon himself and noticed that he was wearing thick cotton clothes for some reason.

“What's with these clothes… it's so inconvenient.”

Shidou pursed his eyebrows while moving his body, and removed the linen clothes. Discarding the mask covering his face, Shidou forcefully flexed his neck. Afterwards, he observed the collar of the stripped outfit and turned away with incomprehension.

“.....A pig?”

Flesh-colored skin in addition to curved, folded ears and the characteristic protruding snout, Shidou was wearing an amusing stuffed animal costume which generally appeared in folktales. He instantly recognized his current resemblance and his body froze motionless.

“...Pig… straw house… could this be…”

At that moment, the entire hut was unexpectedly blown away by a violent windstorm, destroying the already worn out framework.

“U-uwaah!?”

Shidou, whose steps were unsteady due to the intense pressure, was also thrown onto the ground along with the piles of rubble.

“It hurts… what happened?”

Shidou racked his brain as he quaveringly stood up while protecting his head on reflex with his arms. The cause of the massive destruction was evident by then. An expansive shadow had blanketed Shidou entirely.

“.....”

Shidou lifted his head with considerable unease. What had materialized before him was a gargantuan wild beast that could effortlessly intimidate any onlooker with its fearsome disposition. Its sharp and pointed jaws were bared, only to be rivalled by its hound canine fangs which appeared to target Shidou. A pair of gleaming, penetrating eyes marked him as prey.

Fulvous hair furred the entire length of its mammalian body. Its towering height, several times taller than that of Shidou’s, only served to magnify his minuscule proportions comparatively. With its bipedal stature, the predatory creature resembled the villainous antagonist of a children's story. *Canis lupus* - the wolf.

“Kehehe, delicious pig-chan. I'll eat you in one bite!”

The wolf greedily licked its mouth with the tip of its tongue in an exaggerated manner, splattering spit all over the barren ground and onto Shidou’s unfortunate head.

“T-that…”

Shidou trembled while perspiring profusely.

“Wait a moment. Calm down, I'm…”

“Gaaaaaaaah!”

The wolf extended its gaping jaws towards Shidou, with utter disregard for his words.

“Uwaaaaaaah!?”

Aside from the wolf's exterior impression and behavior, it was a comical character if not for its unruly boldness and the bestial odor coming from its body. Shidou could only think of one thing - death. He shouted till his lungs burst and escaped from there while in his lamentable state.

“Hahahaha, you can't run from the likes of me!”

The wolf howled, loud enough to shake even the surrounding air, and chased behind Shidou. By that time, his mind must’ve already been cleared of all chaotic distractions as he ran for his very life. The stuffed animal costume, the straw house and the wolf in hot pursuit…it seemed like

“...*The Three Little Pigs*!?”

Shidou recited the title which popped up in his head while running past the vast grasslands. True, *The Three Little Pigs* is an excessively well-known fairy tale. Each of the three pig brothers built their own separate houses. The eldest brother who used straw and the second brother who used wood had their huts dismantled to debris by the big bad wolf. Only the youngest brother who had devoted his time and used bricks to build his house was ultimately safe. At least, that's how the story goes. Shidou contrasted the story he recalled with his current predicament. He had slept in that rice straw hut… which signified that…

“I'm the first brother that gets eaten, aren't I!?”

Shidou yelled, almost as if he was crying.

“Come back here, pig-chaaaan!”

The wolf roared in a voice which wholly inundated the former’s feebleness.

Perhaps it was sheer luck, or that fate was in his favor. The wolf which was on Shidou’s trail was pursuing him at a pace unfitting for a four-legged beast, due to it awkwardly standing on its hind limbs. As a result, the ridiculous animal couldn't exert enough energy to overtake Shidou’s speed. Nevertheless, he too had almost reached his limit - his whole body ached, his muscles fatigued, his heart and lungs anguished from all the circulation.

“Hah… huu…”

The moment Shidou stopped; he would be swallowed into the wolf's gluttonous belly right away. Thus, he maintained his speed, faltering now and then as he sought for a way to break free.

“.....!”

Unaware of how long he was being chased in a life and death situation, Shidou spotted a tiny building ahead. Furthermore, it *wasn't* the second brother's plain wooden hut. He knew it was impolite to barge in, but his current circumstances warranted otherwise. So Shidou crudely entered the house and locked the door behind him.

“Ha… ha… ha…”

Shidou leaned his weight against the door, doing all he could to prevent any subsequent entry. A few knocks from the other side echoed throughout the room, scaring the daylight out of him. He pressed on as long as he could and continues to counter the wolf as he vigorously strikes the fragile door. After some time had elapsed, the sounds hushed as well, quietening until only silence could be heard. The wolf must've already abandoned trying to wreck Shidou’s refuge.

“S-safe at last…”

He slowly regained his lost composure and stabilized his uneven respiration by stretched out on the floor. Shidou blithely raised his head as if he had neglected something crucial. He recollected that the final scene enacted in the story involved the wolf attempting to invade the youngest brother's brick-and-tile house through the chimney after failing to destroy it repeatedly.

“This place doesn't look like it was built by the other pig brothers. Anyone here…?”

Shidou yelled in order to inform any inhabitants of the impending perilous chimney invasion by a ravenous wolf.

“Excuse me! Is anyone here!?”

An almost inaudible whisper could be heard from inside one of the interior rooms, quiet enough as if it was replying to whoever spoke the line itself.

“Y-yes… who might you be….?”

It looks like someone was there. Shidou felt obliged to tell whoever it was about the danger—

“....Nn?”

Shidou unconsciously inclined his head. He had heard that familiar voice before.

“Just now it was…”

Shidou wrinkled his eyebrows as he approached the source of the previous frequency and peeped into the room. Just as he had expected, a young girl who he knew very well stood there. She has hair like flowing ocean waves and a petite stature in addition to a rabbit puppet mounted on her left hand.

“S-Shidou-san?!”

“...Shidou-kun, good grief!!!”

Yoshino and Yoshinon, who were also pulled into the book world previously, widened their glowing eyes in astonishment. Shidou heaved a sigh of relief and entered the room.

“Yoshino-Yoshinon, are you two okay?!”

“Y-yeah… it's good to see you, Shidou-san!”

“Un, but Shidou-kun, where is this place hm?”

Yoshinon skewed its head.

“I'm not all too sure myself. When I woke up, I found myself in the *Three Little Pigs'* story….eh?”

Shidou halted his sentence midway. Since he was overwhelmed by the touching reunion with Yoshino and Yoshinon, Shidou didn't immediately catch sight of the differences in their apparel. The lovable dresses there were ones that only appeared fairy tales - a cute white blouse, a fancy skirt with decorative lacing, along with a red hood and cloak. She inexplicably resembled *Little Red Riding Hood*.

“Y-Yoshino…your attire?”

“I don't know. It was already like this when I woke up. Then I was called to granny's place…”

“Yup yup, for some reason we can't use our powers and angel, and we don't know anything about this place!”

Small droplets of sweat beaded atop Shidou’s forehead as he listened to their qualms. It was worthy of praise that even Japanese people had heard of these stories. *The Three Little Pigs* and *Little Red Riding Hood* were indeed worldly famous fairy tales. As the story goes, when little red riding hood arrives at her grandmother's house, she was already…. Shidou feigned repugnance at such a thought. He noticed that somebody, or something, was wriggling under the bed sheets inside the room.

“Ah little red riding hood, is there a guest?”

A voice resounded that was rather doughty for an old lady.

“Y-yes. About that… grandma, I should be going soon. I'll put the bread and grape wine right here.”

As Yoshino said that, the grandma swayed under the quilt with a snort.

“Good girl, good girl. You even brought me a delicious pig despite my condition.”

The next moment, an enormous wolf squeezed out of the blankets, disguised in pajamas, a hat and a pair of glasses. That was the same wolf that had chased after Shidou all the way there.

“Yaaaaaah!?”

“Uah! Grandma turned into a wild animal?”

The ventriloquist pair yelled out in shock. The wolf ripped its pretentious clothing and jeered at them.

“Long time no see, pig-chan. Did you think that you could get away that easily?”

“Whaaaa! How did you…!”

Shidou gave out a shocked tone, dumbstruck by the non-sequential series of events which had occurred. Common sense dictates the impossibility of that identical wolf concealing itself inconspicuously under the blanket when it had been chasing Shidou from the beginning.

“Haha, what nonsense are you spouting in ‘this world’? Forget it; allow me to gorge on your succulent flesh!!!”

“Escape fast, Yoshino, Yoshinon!”

“Y-Yes!”

Shidou firmly grasped Yoshino’s hand and exited the house in a flurry, stomping on the doorstep. Like before, they fled to the wilderness in disarray to shake off the wolf. Even so, Shidou, who was leading Yoshino, reached his body's maximum capacity after some time and carelessly slipped in his thoughtlessly.

“Kuh….”

He somehow managed to let go of her delicate hand amidst the disorder so that she didn't stumble as a consequence. However, a substantial amount of time was required to painstakingly attain the former speed, especially after decelerating to rest.

“Shidou-san!”

Yoshino was worried and lent a hand to help Shidou. But it was too late. A vast gloom had formed above the disabled Shidou and the nearing Yoshino.

“Nowhere left to run.”

The wolf's eyes glistened with insatiable hunger as it intently watched their every move. Shidou oppressed a breath and gave Yoshino a push with all the might he could muster.

“Yoshino, run! Hurry!”

“No! I won't abandon Shidou-san! I'm not running away!!”

“Ahahaha! Very well, how exquisite! I trust that you won't have any misgivings. Now then, I shall begin my feast!”

The wolf opened its jagged jaws wide to gobble up the both of them in one big mouthful. Shidou embraced Yoshino as if to adamantly protect her till the very end. He gritted his teeth, enduring the pain. Yet it never happened no matter how long they awaited. Meanwhile, the metallic resonance of a katana being impaled could be heard, along with several loud gunshots accompanied by the excruciating woes of the wolf.

“Kuhh, who are you people?!”

“Eh?”

Shidou lifted his head out of curiosity after hearing the wolf's unusual howls of agony. Two girls had emerged there, standing guard and defending him.

“Are you okay? Shidou! Yoshino!”

“Ehehe, that was a close call, Boy.”

“Tohka! And Nia!?”

Shidou couldn't be gladder when he confirmed the duo’s identities verbally. Indeed, in that moment of imminent peril, two girls had appeared out of nowhere. Tohka was wearing a glittering feather-woven war garment with breezy short pants and hardwood

sandals and holding a polished katana in her hand. Nia, on the other hand, was in a long black coat and wielded dual silver pistols in each hand. Although their outfits were as eccentric as Shidou's, theirs were specifically designed for the character roles of skilled combatants, unlike his and Yoshino's. They had launched a brutal offensive against the wolf to protect Shidou.

The wolf's carapace was inflicted with stabs and gashes, along with bullet wounds all over. Even so, it didn't reveal any cowardice and merely deepened its ferocious taunt while muttering crippled sufferings on the bloodstained ground.

"Hmph, tenacious beast. I guess simplicity doesn't convert well to strength."

Nia aimed her guns as if she was blatantly conveying her inconvenience. She looked in Tohka's direction and continued her rant.

"Tohka-chan. That dumpling on your waist, why don't you unleash it on that damned mutt?"

"Un, this one?"

Tohka nodded in agreement and executed Nia's suggestion. She fished out a millet dumpling from the pocket on her waist and hurled it at the wolf.

"Here it goes."

"Gaaaaaaaaaa-a?"

Regarding it as an attack from Tohka's side, the wolf hastily opened its mouth and ate the dumpling, swallowing the rice ball in amazement. The next second, the wolf entered a remarkable, almost deceiving, trancelike sitting posture that was different from its previous vulgar figure.

"Oh, scrumptious! Not sure what you're up to, but my stomach shall welcome you all!!"

"Eh….?"

The wolf lowered its head apologetically as Shidou gasped.

"Yaa pig-chan and little red riding hood-san, I'm sorry for what I did. I was too enthusiastic since I was really starving…"

“Ah, uh….”

The sudden discontinuity in the wolf's attitude startled Shidou. At the same time, Nia chuckled with a slight hint of derision.

“As expected of Momotarou's dumplings, it sure is effective against dogs,”

Nia praised as she patted Tohka’s shoulders. Like she said, Tohka’s dress up could easily be recognized by any Japanese person. Japan's number one folklore, the Peach Boy. [1]

“Is such a thing called a dumpling….?”

“Well, the details don't matter,”

Nia explained as she shrugged her shoulders. Although some things weren't so elaborated yet, it was as she expounded. Shidou could unwind and rest at last, and deliberately sprung up to his legs to confront the pair.

“Umm… thanks, Tohka, Nia.”

“Un, what matters is that you're fine.”

Tohka smiled as she expertly sheathed her blade into its scabbard with a clank. Her hair was tied into a single ponytail and she wore a trademark headband across her forehead. Somehow, her costume emitted a peculiar sense of masterful coordination.

“Is something wrong?”

“No, never mind. Anyway, do you know where this place is, Nia? Are we rolled up inside <Beelzebub>?”

Being interrogated by Shidou in such a way, Nia abashedly let out an *un* of acknowledgement.

“Not exactly… Sure, we are in <Beelzebub>, but we’re not only in <Beelzebub>. To be precise, the fantasy we're seeing is an adjacent world created by <Beelzebub>.”

“Another world?!”

Shidou furrowed his eyebrows when he listened to her inferred conclusion. The Adjacent World - that was where the Spirits were stranded without any hope.

“It just looks like that. Basically, we're in a separate space cut off from the external world.”

“I-I see, then what about Yoshino’s and everyone's clothing?”

“Un, the Phantom Library is based on everyone's imagination. Fantasies and dreams are the blueprints which depict this space.”

“That means?”

“Well, in summary, <Beelzebub> gathers information about various *monogatari*s and combines their scenarios. We, being trapped inside it, are also mixed in among them.” [2]

“Monogatari…”

“Yeah. Your clothes look rather ordinary, Boy. Did you associate them with anything?”

“Ah, when I woke up I was in a stuffed pig costume, and then I got chased by this wolf…”

“Huh? Oh of course, the *Three Little Pigs*! Ahh why did you take it off?! I wanna see…”

“D-don’t make a fuss about that!”

As Shidou declined Nia in shy embarrassment, he observed everyone's appearances anew. Indeed, everyone was wearing costumes of different fairy tale characters. Shido’s the *Three Little Pigs*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Momotarou*, furthermore—

“Hm?”

Shidou gave a puzzled expression towards Nia.

“Nia, which character are you?”

Although he could roughly deduce the others' attires fundamentally, Shidou couldn't make out who Nia's was. At the very least, he had never seen such a protagonist in any of the stories which he had heard of before.

"This? It's Silver Bullet's Fatima."

"Silver Bullet…. Huh, isn't that the manga you drew?!"

Nia's contradictory answer caused Shidou to exclaim in derangement, even though it was a bona fide fact. Her clothes inexplicably shared a striking similarity with the leading hero in Honjou Souji's manga, Silver Bullet.

"Kukuku, there's nothing strange about producing a plot, Boy. The probability of a popular piece of work to rise in the rankings is high, passing a lot of others for granted. But in my case, my monogatari was realized by the hand of fate!"

"R-Really? And I thought it was restricted to only fairy tales…"

"Nonsense. If we're talking about people's opinions about stories, they exist no matter where you are. As a convenient analogy for the public, isn't there an extremely popular and also familiar modern character that likes walking in big strides? You know, that renowned black and white mouse—"

"Stop! I don't think you should touch on that particular topic."

Shidou yelled while shaking his head from side to side.

"A-Anyway, I've acquired an approximate understanding about what kind of place we're stuck in. But I was unconscious when I came here… do you know how much time has passed since then?"

Shidou restlessly crooked his brows and enquired such. When he and the others had first arrived there, they were in route to Ratatoskr. If they blindly squander away their precious time, Ratatoskr's base would probably be ravaged by either Mukuro from the cosmos or DEM's devilish claws until practically nothing remained. As if she noticed Shidou's anxieties, Nia gently unfolded his clenched palms to soothe his uneasiness.

"Well, haste brings no success. Boy, you need to calm down at a time like this. The flow of time is slower in this world, nothing major should happen in a short while."

“I-Is that so?”

Her words gave his mind some peace. Nia resumed her speech.

“Though that'd be great, we still haven't found a way out or any prerequisites for that, so we shouldn't be too relaxed.”

“That's right, I almost forgot. How are we supposed to get out of here?”

Nia crisscrossed her hands on her chest, troubled by the sudden question.

“Well… the only surefire method is to get Westcott to reopen the passageway with <Beelzebub>, but…”

“Hmm…”

Shidou exposed a cumbersome expression. There was no way that he and the others could entrust their hopes to the very foe that had captured them. First and foremost, even if Westcott wanted to liberate them for some reason, it would only be after he had achieved all of his selfish objectives.

“Besides that… we have no other choice but to seek a character that's able to smash this world from the inside. Either one of those protagonists that only come on stage in fairy tales, or possibly an omnipotent superhero…”

“Does someone like that even exist?”

“Yeah, this world consists of all kinds of monogataris mingled together, be it ancient or modern. I'm not sure which one has that type of role, but even if there is one, don’t you think that he will be willing to lend us his power readily.”

Shidou pursed his eyebrows carelessly towards Nia’s statement. He was completely unaware of how absurdly broad that world was - it was like looking for a needle in a haystack. Yet, Shidou was unable to stay still and plainly do nothing. He poured out a light breath, raising his head decisively.

“In short, we should find everyone else first. Kotori and the others must have been sent flying to somewhere here too.”

“Un, that's about it.”

“In that case, let's begin. It'd be meaningless to return if everyone isn't here.”

Shidou said that resolutely as the others nodded in endorsement. However, Tohka awkwardly hugged her chest with both hands.

“But Shidou, how will we do that?”

“Um, that's…”

Shidou was at a loss for words to reply her. As a policy, it was the right thing to do. But frankly, he hadn't the slightest clue as to how. Shidou vexingly sank into deep thought. The wolf, which had remained reticent up till then, was attentively listening to their heated conversation and slowly raised its paw.

“About that, could it be that you're looking for your companions who came into this world together with you?”

“Ah, that's correct.”

Shidou answered perplexedly to the courteous wolf which had undergone a total personality change just a few moments ago. The wolf haughtily thumped its chest in pride and continued.

“Then this nose of mine may come in handy. With regards to this world, you guys are foreigners with a unique smell. I can sniff out this peculiar odor and follow its traces.”

“R-Really?”

“Rather competent eh, wolf.”

Tohka’s facial expression brightened with vivid liveliness as she petted its furry head. The wolf certainly regarded the person who had fed it a dumpling as its master, barking cheerfully.

“Saa, we should get a move on and set out. Although it's meager, I sense something in a small town north of here.”

“We'll depend on you then.”

Shidou forced strength into both feet and shakily stood up. But due to excessive usage, his exercised legs soon toppled over after a split second of frailty.

“Otto-to…”

“A-Are you okay, Shidou?”

“Aah I'm fine, just a bit tired.”

Hearing Shidou’s words, the wolf felt a twinge of guilt and curved down its ears.

“Truly sorry, it's my fault. Let me transport little pig-san as an apology.”

“There's no need to go that far.”

“No no, don't worry about it. Come, please enter my mouth. I'm the type that swallows my prey whole and doesn't bite. I'll regurgitate you when we arrive, don't worry.”

“.....”

Shidou could only shake his head in silence towards such an unduly frightening offer.

◇◇◇

“....-ri! Kotori!”

“..... no… such thing.”

Under her ever fading consciousness, Kotori’s frail ears heard a nostalgic voice. Nevertheless, her body was unable to detect any sufficient stimulus, and it wasn't limited to only her physical body. Even the cognition of her brain was incapable of issuing a response. The only thing that governed Kotori’s sleepy body at that time was profound drowsiness. Her cold hands and feet were frostbitten until she couldn't even feel them anymore. If she were to surrender to the unyielding demon of sleep then, it would be unlikely for her to wake up ever again. Although this specific point was well understood in her wavering mind, Kotori couldn't surge up any meaningful effort to resist. Only a thin sliver of withering awareness remained in her, and it was dropping little by little into the bottomless void of slumber, like tiny grains of sand in an hourglass.

“Ah Shidou, good timing. Kotori’s out cold!”

“Request. This is extremely dangerous. Please carry out cardiopulmonary resuscitation.”

“...Uah, fondling her chest right from the start. Truly brave.”

“Disregard. A little won't matter in urgent situations like this. Please engage directly.”

“...W-W-What are you doing!!”

Kotori yelled unbearably as she felt her two breasts being kneaded. She instantly opened her eyes in surprise, only to discover that the person passionately fondling her chest wasn't her dear brother Shidou, but two girls with identical faces.

“What are you doing…? Kaguya, Yuzuru,”

Kotori asked with half a glance. They looked at each other and immediately turned to Kotori. They were wearing simple and crude clothing and carried some sizable luggage. Although their outfits were alike, Kaguya was wearing short pants whereas Yuzuru was wearing a skirt. Their physiques and hairstyles were similar, augmenting the fact that they were born as twins.

“Kuku, we’ve deceived you good, Kotori.”

“Agreement. Shidou’s name awakens you with great efficacy through the power of love.”

The two girls who had been massaging Kotori’s bosom up till then unhurriedly wandered their fingers. Kotori suddenly brushed them off and attempted to stand up, only to collapse onto the ground in exhaustion.

“A-Anything wrong?”

“Worry. You appear to be fully debilitated.”

“....Of course I'm weak.”

Kotori exhaled a foggy breath and weakly gazed at the wretched condition of her surroundings. Their current location was one that only showed up in fairy tales, an

ordinary street in a foreign country. The problem, however, did not lie there, but in the treacherous climate. As far as her eye could see, everything was pure white. The endless snow had dyed the entire scene in a fluffy blanket of silvery white. Under the harsh weather, Kotori only wore simple and crude clothing, without any decent barrier against the icy winter cold. It was inevitable for her body to be weakened. She peered inside the frosted basket in her hands, and encountered a pile of soggy matches.

“Really… I look like *The Little Match Girl*.”

“*The Little Match Girl*?”

“Enquiry. What is that?”

The twins inclined their heads in the same direction and Kotori replied with a minor sigh.

“It's a children's story written by Andersen. A poor girl tries to sell matches in the street in the winter, but couldn't sell even a single match. Unable to tolerate the frigid cold, the girl ignited the matches to warm herself…. *achu*” [3]

Kotori sneezed halfway through her storytelling. Although she was painstakingly revived by the Yamai sisters, her dire situation hadn't improved much compared to before.

“A change of place seems proper. ‘Tis much cold-seasoned.”

“Consent. We must evade the snow somewhere else.”

Kaguya and Yuzuru firmly pulled onto Kotori’s hands as if supporting her shoulders upright, and trampled across the unimpeded snowfield. After numerous minutes had elapsed, the three finally arrived at a narrow, cramped alley. Naturally, the cold was still present everywhere, but that place was a disposal site for waste scraps so there weren't any gusts of freezing wind blowing through. Thanks to the many overhead roofs of the condensed buildings, the snowfall couldn't accumulate on the tundra-like ground.

“Indoors would be preferable, but we ought to make do with this alternative.”

“Approval. If only we had a fire.”

Yuzuru said while looking into Kotori’s basket as she realized a brilliant idea. Kotori, who already knew what Yuzuru was thinking of, reciprocated by extracting a box of matches from the basket in her hands.

“Though this is merchandise, I can't do anything about it so allow me to use it like the little match girl did.”

Kotori declared as she took out a match from the box.

“By the way, the story's incomplete. What did the girl do after that?”

“Ah that….”

Kotori struck the match against the side of the box for friction and the tip burst into flames. The next moment, faintly discernable hallucinations of lukewarm soup, roasted chicken and various other delicacies drifted in the finite space illuminated by the fire.

“Waa, what is this sorcery?!”

“Astonishment. Cuisine appeared out of nowhere.”

The Yamai sisters widened their eyes, astounded. Kotori was no exception. Although she was placed in the little match girl's position, Kotori didn't expect to view such phenomena. But the match could only burn for that long. After all, the puny flame could only last for mere seconds and soon died out, along with all the delicious illusions.

“Ah… it vanished.”

“Wonder. What an unthinkable event. Is there an ingredient in the match that can incur these imaginations?”

“I don't think it's related to that….”

Kotori grinned wryly. Kaguya was exuberantly captivated by the remaining matches.

“Then did the story proceed this way?”

“Ah well… the girl lit the matches after that, and saw visions of the happiness she never had. She passed away peacefully the next morning.”

“Eh… how did it become so sad?”

“Suggestion. If so—”

Yuzuru thought of something and quickly gathered a few pieces of timber from the recesses of the road to construct an impromptu bonfire.

“Request. Kotori, ignite this.”

“Eh? Alright.”

Kotori hurriedly scraped a match and kindled the disused wood. The previously unreliable spark soon turned into a robust fire. As if in direct proportion to the flame, the scenes of dainty delicacies manifested once again like an infinite supply of recherché food, a nice and warm stove, and the image of a gently smiling Shidou.

“Uwaah, a mirage?! It looks so lifelike!”

“Amazement. Even Shidou is here, sure enough he responded to Kotori’s heart.”

“S-Shut up... forget it. Thank goodness we're warm.”

Using the matches to arbitrarily light a bonfire somehow violated the sullen atmosphere of the little match girl, but survival required sacrifice. No matter how joyous or morose a story was, playing the main character and freezing to death under the snow wasn't worthwhile. For the sake of retaining her body temperature, Kotori thrust her stiff hands above the bonfire and her numb fingers regained their sense perceptions at last. As if in concert, her mourning stomach furtively let out a low-pitched grumble.

“Hm? Kotori, are thou famished?”

Kaguya asked with concern, causing Kotori’s cheeks to blush red with bashfulness.

“Kuh…. What can I do, it's so cold… If only I could eat these.”

Kotori yearned as she extended her emaciated hand towards the fluttering images. However, the optical illusions were only virtual images, so Kotori could only clutch the airy nothingness futilely.

“Should’ve expected this much…”

Kotori muttered to herself with unreconciled dissatisfaction. Simultaneously, Kaguya clapped her hands while theorizing a sudden notion.

“Hey, Yuzuru that stuff from before.”

“Eureka. We do possess that.”

“What is it?”

Kotori wrinkled her eyebrows utterly baffled by the twins’ synchronized exchange. Afterwards, Kaguya and Yuzuru advertently unfolded the bulky luggage that they had subtly carried along with them, revealing a mysterious item to Kotori.

“This is….!”

Kotori was completely overwhelmed with awe, flabbergasted as expected. The reason was simple. What Kaguya and Yuzuru had taken out from the bags on their back was a colorful variety of gingerbread biscuits, sugary sweets and pastries galore.

“You two, where did you get these?”

“Hm? I hath awakened with Yuzuru inside the forsaken Schwarzwald. Together we explored athwart the cursed Black Forest, and encountered the devil's candy abode.” [4]

“Explanation. Due to hunger, we fetched a portion of the house's walls and roof.”

“Wha….”

Kotori was incessantly stupefied at their intricate descriptions, but she could comprehend their circumstances were reasonably similar to hers.

“So that's how it is. You two are Hansel and Gretel.”

“Hansel and what?”

“Doubt. Gretel?”

Towards the twins’ discombobulation, Kotori nodded in affirmation.

“Yeah. It's another fairy tale. A pair of siblings that were abandoned by their stepmother and afterwards they discovered a candy-coated house in a forest. Anyway, did the both of you find anyone living there?”

Questioned by Kotori, they seemingly recalled the sequence of events which had occurred and confirmed her uncertain suspicions.

“Come to speak of it, an elderly dame resided there and beckoned us to enter forthwith. The old frailty seemed rather dubious; hence we paid her no heed.”

“Concurrence. Then, she got enraged and chased after us furiously.”

“Kaka, that wretch of a cur stood no chance against the likes of us Yamai!”

“Authentication. Kaguya was so frightened that she wet herself when she saw the witch's viciousness, and cried like a baby while running.”

“I did no such thing!!”

“.....”

Listening to their casual remarks caused Kotori to smile, albeit forcefully. Hansel and Gretel were successfully deceived and captured by the wicked witch in the original story, but for those two twins, there wasn't anything worth worrying about.

“Well… what's important is that you're fine. May I have some of those?”

“Of course, eat as much as you desire.”

Thus, Kaguya straightened out her chest and handed over some light refreshments to Kotori, to which she gratefully accepted. Kotori blissfully placed a wide range of high-calorie edibles such as chocolate chip cookies and honeyed doughnuts in her waiting mouth, chewing on their sugary goodness. Although these sweet treats were commonly regarded as a girl's natural enemy, they were a dependable source of sustenance and energy in Kotori’s bleak situation. Kotori could vibrantly experience the mild, mouthwatering sensation of the starchy sugar melting in the depths of her mouth, pure sweetness was diffusing throughout her taste buds. At the same time, her entire body permeated with rejuvenation, her limbs nourished by the nutritious carbohydrates.

“Oh, sure wish there's a lollipop somewhere in here… No, I shouldn't say such extravagant words.”

“I see it. I see a stick I shouldn't be seeing…!”

“Amazement. An illusory lollipop.”

Kotori couldn't help but grimace at the two's exaggerated reactions.

“What are you two saying…? Well thanks for saving me, Kaguya, Yuzuru.”

“Kaka, mind not. ‘Tis nothing for us Yamai.”

“Consent. We ought to mutually assist each other in times of need.”

As the twins leisurely expressed their intimate camaraderie whilst softly giggling, Kotori lightly scratched her chin in awkward embarrassment.

“Be that as it may, we aren't far off from where we started. What the hell is this world…. are we really trapped inside a book?”

The very last memory they could faintly recollect was of the fierce confrontation against Westcott at Ratatoskr’s secret base, and being ruthlessly engulfed within the phantasmal pages of a gigantic book afterwards. That was undoubtedly one of the Demon King <Beelzebub>’s diabolical abilities. But they were still clueless and unaware of where they were currently situated in, along with their current circumstances.

“In short, we need to find a way back.”

Kotori summarized briefly as Kaguya crisscrossed her svelte arms on her chest.

“Easier said than done. What's our plan?”

“That's… unknown. But since we've been thrown into this world, the others should also be here. For the time being, let's rendezvous with everyone else first before we come up with a strategy—”

Kotori’s sentence was abruptly interrupted. Discrete sounds of horse-drawn carriages traversing through the road's gateway reached their ears from that direction, in addition to the informal chattering of pedestrians.

“.....Today's carts are plenty eh, what goes on?”

“Haven't you heard? A banquet’s to be convened at the royal palace to announce a certain fellow.”

“Some fellow? What merits that, some king's bastard offspring?”

“Nah… a servant at the palace I know says that someone had stumbled upon a legendary mermaid and wants to offer her to the King. The King plans to hold a ball and unveil the mermaid there.”

“Mermaid? In your dreams… Since when did something like that exist?”

“It's true! It looks like the mermaid keeps singing ‘Darling, Darling’.”

“.....”

Hearing that conversation, Kotori and the others stared at each other with blank deadpan faces.

“...What do you think?”

“Um, uh…”

“Predicament. That mermaid seems rather familiar.”

After several seconds of silence, the three unconsciously stood up altogether.

◇◇◇

At Fraxinus’ bridge, a warning alarm which signified an emergency situation rang throughout the room.

An urgent scene, captured by a surveillance camera, was clearly displayed on the large LCD screen. A sketched schematic map of Ratatoskr’s base which was marked with a multitude of flashing red dots was shown on the monitor, inciting chaos amongst the disordered crew members.

“Although the aerial bombs have stopped, it seems like a gunfight has broken out at the base!”

“DEM Industries’ wizards’ and numerous <Bandersnatch> units’ signals have been confirmed there.”

“Where's the Commander and the others?!”

“She isn't responding even though we've been trying to contact her several times!”

“How did this happen! Aaaaaaa, my Misty-sama!”

The entire bridge was filled to the brim with the crew's laments and howls. On a side note, Nakatsugawa placed a figurine of one of his waifus, which was supposed to be strictly prohibited on the panel as a decoration, devotedly praying to the statuette with his palms closed as if it was an image of God.

But that was a matter of course. From Ratatoskr’s intelligence, DEM Industries’ warships had appeared above their base and launched an all-out attack. To Fraxinus’ crew members, who were conducting maintenance for an operation in space, the assault was like being hit at their flanks without prelude. To the many mechanics that were doing onsite reparations, it was completely unexpected as well.

“Hu… Hu…”

One of the members of the team, Shiizaki Hinako, attempted to temporarily calm her fervent heartbeat down by placing her hands on her chest and suppressing the intense rhythm. However, the more she thought of calming down, the faster and more violently her heart pulsed.

Then, the characters 《MARIA》 appeared on each of their personal monitors.

“Eh?”

Hinako rounded her eyes in surprise as she heard Fraxinus’ AI, Maria’s voice from her automation console’s speaker.

『Please calm down, Hinako. You will lose if you are more afraid than the enemy during a time like this. Relax, follow your training. No problem, you are outstanding and I am aware of that the most.』

“T-That… Roger.”

Hinako whispered dazedly towards Maria's sincere advice. Attentively observing the surroundings, the other crew members seemed to be in the same boat. Their respective monitors brightened up, and conversed with them as if to console them. Everyone was as astounded as Hinako, but they all retrieved cool heads in the end. As if in harmony with the situation, Vice Commander Kannazuki's voice reverberated throughout the bridge.

"Really. Like Maria said, keep your cool everyone. Where's the notification from the base?"

"Roger! After locating Fraxinus' Commander Itsuka and Shidou-kun, along with the Spirits, we'll begin the operation for <Zodiac>!"

"Hm, very well. We will complete preparations prior to Commander's and the others' return, and also defend this place."

Kannazuki instructed in a composed manner, to which the crew answered 'Understood' with a deep breath.

However.

The next moment.

An explosion louder than before shook the whole bridge.

"Kuh…! This is…?!"

Kawagoe shouted as the monitor displayed a visual of outside Fraxinus. Innumerable <Bandersnatch> units and wizards equipped with CR-units could be confirmed from the warehouse. It appeared that the enemy had finally arrived there.

"Base lower ground has been shot! Although damages are minor, the enemy's wizards have already invaded Fraxinus' interior!"

The crew felt the engines shudder.

"Damn it! If we don't retaliate at once…!"

"But if a battle occurs in the warehouse—"

The entire bridge roused into a confused uproar, only to sink into silence when Kannazuki clapped his hands.

“I have a countermeasure. Maria, deploy the ship's Territory, limit the scope to 50, and define its attribute to obstruct any production of magical power.”

『Understood. Initializing Realizer basis. Deploying Territory.』

As Maria commenced the processes, feeble sounds of subjugation resounded from inside the warship and an invisible Territory spread out around the ship. In an instant, the numerous <Bandersnatch> units inside the warehouse suddenly collapsed, like puppets having their strings detached.

“The <Bandersnatch> units!”

“Aah, utilizing our Territory neutralized their magical power sources, essentially rendering them inactive.”

“A-As expected of Vice Commander!”

Mikimoto gave out praise, to which Kannazuki preserved a conscientious expression instead of a complacent one.

“However.”

Simultaneously, another explosion rocked the whole bridge.

“This only blocks Territories. It's meaningless against fleshy humans and metal bullets.”

“Wha….”

“Then what's the use!” cried the crew.

The next moment, a *boom* blasted the bridge's door open, and several wizards wearing linear armor with firearms in hands entered the room.

“All personnel, hands above your heads!”

“Any suspicious movements and we'll shoot!”

“Gaaah!?”

Confronted by the unexpected series of events, Hinako couldn't refrain from uttering her grievances with hands held aloft. The other crew members obeyed the enemies’ directives too, following suit. The wizards inspected the state of affairs and eyed at each other, speaking in low whispers.

“Heh~ So this is the legendary Fraxinus?”

“The warship that even Arbatel couldn't shoot down now stifled by us three, this truly deserves some merit. Westcott-sama will be greatly pleased.”

“Don't get too full of yourselves, you two. Rather than speaking about useless stuff, tie them up and turn off the ship's AI.”

The words were uttered by the man who appeared to be their captain. The other two immediately obeyed.

“Saa, I'll be binding you then. Don't worry, Westcott-sama fancies you a lot, he won't do anything bad to you.”

The wizard inattentively held his gun and approached the closest hostage, Hinako. He grabbed her hands and pushed her onto the floor.

“Ah….!”

“Don't resist. I've been told to capture you alive if possible.”

The wizard's tone was unrelenting.

“....ch.”

At that moment, a huge tiger's head appeared from above Hinako and roared thunderously at the wizard.

“Uaaah?!”

The wizard was staggered by the sudden manifestation of the tiger's stature, and gave out a stunned yell while pulling the trigger on his gun. Yet the bullet just went through

the tiger and hit the wall, recoiling off hoarsely. By then, he had finally realized that the tiger was just a holographic hologram.

“Wha….?!”

The remaining two wizards’ attentions were also drawn by the tiger, to the extent that they believed Kannazuki had covertly escaped. The wizard that was startled by the faux animal projection let out a dejected wail and toppled backwards as he lost balance.

“Eh….? Ah—”

Without delay, Kannazuki instantly grasped the favorable turn of events, at a rate that even the naked eye could not discern, and kicked the wizard's lower jaw with his leg.

“Well done, Maria. I'll clean your motion unit as a reward.”

『Disgusting, Kannazuki.』

Maria replied to Kannazuki’s commendation with a cold shoulder. The dumbfounded wizards aimed the muzzles of their guns at him as they regained composure, albeit sluggishly.

“You little….!”

“Don't resist….!”

Just before their fingers pressed the triggers…

“Ah… Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!”

Nakatsugawa’s sorrowful mourning echoed throughout the bridge.

“W-What happened?!”

His sudden anguished lamentation caused the wizards to redirect their weapons in his direction, though Nakatsugawa was not in the least concerned about that and resumed choking with sobs. At the center of his palm, the cause of his weeping could be perceived. Due to unusually bad luck, the bullet which previously ricocheted had found its way to the object currently in Nakatsugawa’s palm, destroying its upper body.

“Curse you… Curse you curse you curse you!! How dare you do this to my Misty!!!”

Nakatsugawa shed tears of blood as he impetuously charged at the wizard who was pointing a gun at him, full of fury and resentment. Politely speaking, Nakatsugawa’s body wasn't really slim, he could still be considered as a human projectile, literally.

“Kuh….?!”

The wizard took aim at him and pulled the trigger, the bullet puncturing Nakatsugawa’s shoulder as blood spurt out. But he couldn't feel any dread or agony and kept charging whilst fueled by his rage until he knocked the wizard down onto the floor.

“Kuheh!”

The wizard's head forcefully collided with the hard surface, eliciting a cry of acute pain. Yet Nakatsugawa still didn't cease his relentless assault at that point, crushing the wizard with his body weight as he began to beat him up.

“Gaaaaah!”

“I —puuhh…”

There was no great distinction between an ordinary person and a wizard who had his Territory disabled. The one who was being attacked by Nakatsugawa desperately shielded his sore head with his hands. Seeing this, the last wizard aligned his gun to Nakatsugawa’s body. The distance between them was approximately a mere 10 meters; moreover, Nakatsugawa was a stationary target. An experienced wizard could easily hit the bullseye with extremely high accuracy.

“Uu!”

In a flash, Hinako reached into her bosom to fish out a voodoo doll, and quickly recited a high-speed chant whilst firmly gripping onto the doll.

“Uaaah!?”

The wizard who had a gun in his hand consequently issued an intriguing voice, as if cursed by Hinako’s dark arts. Kannazuki couldn't let go of that opportunity to exploit the wizard's momentary weakness and swiftly advanced towards him, kicking the gun in his hand away. His offensive did not end there, as he used his arm to vigorously strangle the wizard's neck until he fainted from the lack of oxygen.

Converting to the exact duration, the whole procedure didn't even take an estimate of three minutes. Within that short period of time, the crisis that had arisen in Fraxinus was addressed and dealt with accordingly.

“Ha, that's sorted out now.”

Kannazuki said that as he flexed his wrists. Everyone other than Nakatsugawa breathed a sigh of relief.

“Ha….I thought we were doomed.”

“This is bad for my heart… Ah Nakatsugawa-kun, that guy's unconscious already so you can stop now.”

Minowa told Nakatsugawa, as he tearfully whimpered and relinquished.

“Uu, Misty…. I'm sorry, Misty….”

As if he finally remembered that his shoulder had been severely wounded by a bullet, Nakatsugawa yelled in pain while rolling on the floor.

“Ahh my shoulder! It hurts! Uaah! Uaah!”

“Geez, don't move around so much! Analyst Murasame, can I leave him in your care?”

“Ah, I'll stop the bleeding. It seems that the shoulder blade has been fractured. A medical Realizer should do the trick. Remove your jacket first.”

Reine began emergency treatment of Nakatsugawa’s injury. Suddenly, Maria spoke.

『Everyone, good work. Please retrieve the wizards’ weapons and Realizer units while they are still unconscious, and restrain them. Also, Nakatsugawa and Shiizaki.』

“W-What’s the matter?”

The two people who had their names unexpectedly called lifted their heads with curiosity. Maria continued in her monotonous voice.

『I have come to realize the strategic implications of figurines and dolls. I shall review whether or not to permit such objects in the bridge.』

◇◇◇

“Achoo! Achoo!”

Towards Nia who repeatedly sneezed in an unladylike demeanor without any fair virtue, Shidou merely forced a wry smile.

“Hehe, are you alright?”

“As if. What's up with this place…? It's so cold…”

As she complained, Nia buried her head in her long black coat and securely buttoned the lapels. Her actions were understandable, as Shidou and the party had navigated through a hazardous mountain range with fortitude under the kind wolf's altruistic guidance. But as they arrived at the destined small town, the season, the weather, and even the very concept of time significantly transformed in a split second.

A silvery white sheet of snow had covered the entire settlement, and the darkening sky had already begun to dusk. The solitary path was dimly illuminated by a few streetlamps, creating a picturesque scene which amply resembled an aesthetic painting. Such a landscape was one that solely existed within an amalgamation of incongruously unique *monogatari*s.

“Hey Boy, do you still have your animal costume?”

“Not anymore. Aren't you wearing an overcoat yourself? Tohka and Yoshino, are you two doing alright?”

“Un, I'm fine.”

“No p-problem, I'm used to the cold.”

As the other two nodded in reply, Nia exaggeratedly sneezed again.

“So cold, dammit. Let's find imouto-chan fast and go somewhere warm…”

“Right. About that… according to the wolf, the scent is coming from that castle there.”

Shidou shifted his line of sight to the great castle located deep in the recesses of the street. The wolf, who was conveniently leading their way, had parted ways with the group before they collectively entered the residential district. No matter how, it was simply too conspicuous to bring an oversized animal into the town just like that. It would stir up an unwanted commotion throughout the place.

As a matter of fact, a number of townspeople and freelance travelers were already allured by the strangely dressed Shidou and the others rather clandestinely, like they were otherworldly foreigners on the qui vive. After all, they were an alienated crowd of people with unlike outlooks and nationalities compared to what the norm was there. Although the denizens and townsfolk could somehow relate, there was always an

explicit sense of discomfort and unease amongst them which lead to Shidou's and the others' anathematization, vilifying them as if they were their bête noire.

"In short, let's head to that castle. We don't have any other clues anyway."

Everyone separately expressed their approval regarding Shidou's suggestion. He nodded back to them, and resolutely strode onwards on the main road. ——Not knowing how long they had walked for, Shidou and the others soon halted their footsteps as they arrived at the preordained castle. The reason was simple. Some sort of dispute had occurred in front of the castle.

"That's…."

Shidou gazed at that place from a safe distance. It would appear that a man who seemed to be the guardian of the castle's gate was being forcedly interrogated by three demanding young girls. They looked like—

"Kotori! Kaguya! Yuzuru!"

Shidou called out the girls' names, and the trio instantly turned back in response.

"Shidou! Are you okay…. why are you guys in those clothes…?"

Kotori's expression deviated as she observed their outfits while Shidou quickened his pace as he ran towards his dear sister.

"I'm glad you're okay too… What happened here?"

"As you can see, someone in the castle knows of a mermaid."

Kaguya responded as she folded her hands in discontent.

"Mermaid?"

"Aah, a rare critter that keeps singing 'Darling, Darling'."

"I-I see…."

Shidou, while perspiring profusely, was convinced he knows that mermaid.

"However, this idiotic excuse for a guard right here doesn't understand human speech."

"Contempt. He won't let Yuzuru and I enter the castle."

The soldier put on a solemn face towards the Yamai sisters' words.

“No way am I letting you rascals in! A prestigious ball is being held in the castle today for noblemen and the highly privileged elite. Shabby commoners like you aren't allowed any entry!”

“What did you say with those crippled lips of yours?! How dare a lowly wretch like you ignore my overflowing magnanimity?!”

“Indignation. Judging someone by their looks is utterly disrespectful.”

“Go to hell! That new guy over there looks even more suspicious! Get lost or I'll throw you bastards in jail!!”

The guard’s voice became more boorish as he waved his hand as if to usher Kotori and the others away. His distrust had grown exponentially with Shidou’s and the others’ arrival.

“If this goes on, we won't be able to get in the castle.”

“But we can't just go in like this. Want to try to sneak in?”

“No, making the guard pass out is faster.”

“Agreement. Good idea.”

While Kotori and the Yamai sisters discussed their mischievous acts, the guard’s temper went from bad to worse.

“I heard everything, you group of vile criminals! That's enough. Guards—”

At that moment, the sounds of travelling carriages could be heard from the back, and the guard couldn't help but stop his sentence abruptly while widening his eyes in shock.

“Hm?”

Shidou felt a cold chill down his spine and looked behind his back, acquiring realization of the guard’s agitated chagrin. Galloping gracefully on the main road leading to the royal castle was a majestic carriage which was drawn by knightly horses with sparkling white fur and had a resplendent chariot that gloriously bathed under the sublime incandescence of the streetlamps. It was as if the light vehicle had emerged from a fantastical portal to the dream world.

Shidou and the Spirits, who intently stared at the ethereal proceedings, were being thoroughly captivated in absolute silence. With all eyes focusing on it, the carriage’s wheels were slowly brought to a fixed stop as it reached the gate. The coach driver then stepped down the cart and respectfully opened the main compartment, revealing an elegant woman. She wore a ceremonious dress with a gemstone-like radiance which

only served to magnificently highlight her beautiful looks that were not inferior in any aspect. In addition, she was wearing glittering glass heels. Under such holy circumstances, the on looking guard, and all the invitees to the ball held their breaths in admiration as if they had been graced by the presence of a goddess.

“Ah.”

But only Shidou and the others who originated from the outside world knew of her identity and induced a response of familiarity. She was indeed very pretty, striving for everyone's attention. But firstly, that girl was—

“Natsumi?!”

A Spirit who was also sucked into that world with Shidou and the others.

“Ara, Shidou, everyone, how are you?”

Natsumi, who was wearing a gorgeous dress, greeted them. Although she was clearly Natsumi, her proportions weren't of the normal Natsumi’s size. Her charming long hair was obviously recreated by <Haniel>.

“What happened, Natsumi? That appearance… you are able to use your angel?!”

Kotori asked Natsumi, to which calmly shook her head in denial.

“Uun, a magician appeared before me and transformed my appearance. Pretty, right?”

Natsumi did a quick pirouette to show off her beauty, causing Shidou and Kotori to look to each other as if they knew what the other was thinking. It looks like Kotori had theorized which fairy tale Natsumi was involved in. On the other hand, Natsumi, the person in question, showed not even the slightest care and merely faced the guard.

“Hello guard-san, can you let me in?”

“Yes madam! Please enter as you wish!”

In an attitude that was completely disparate from before, the guard cleared the way. Seeing this preferential treatment, Kaguya pouted in dissatisfaction.

“You damn jerk! What's with your two-faced persona!?”

“S-Shut up! How can **you** compare to a noble like her?!” refuted the guard. As if she noticed their current situation, Natsumi swayed her eyebrows.

“Ara, do Kaguya and everyone want to go in the castle too?”

“Aah, but this imbecile is blocking our way.”

“Hmm… is that so?”

Natsumi said that as she seductively used her finger to caress the guard’s chin.

“They're with me; can you let them in too?”

“Ha?! But that way…”

The guard uttered as he held his breath, intoxicated by Natsumi who mystifyingly relaxed her lips.

“Ne~, please~”

“Alright, come in—”

At that time, the giant clock precariously mounted on the castle's wall ringed a hymn as the hour hand struck twelve. Accompanying the sounds of bells, Natsumi’s body gently emitted a pale glow and diminished back to her normal size.

“Eh?!”

Not only did her body revert, but her dress also changed into patchy frayed clothing and the carriage she had rode on turned into an orange pumpkin.

“Huh…. What's going on here?!”

Natsumi, whose height had shortened to about Yoshino’s, was flustered by the events that were unfolding contrary to her hopes and quickly examined herself. Shidou caught sight of the clock, and immediately made the connection between Natsumi’s transfiguration and the current time.

The clock had struck midnight. In other words, it was time for Cinderella’s magic to expire.

“.....”

The guard who had been assailed by Natsumi just a few seconds ago once again exposed a sinister expression, glaring at the miniature Natsumi. Frightened by him, Natsumi timidly hid behind Yoshino.

“Bitch! How dare you deceive me with your repulsive witchcraft?! You're not passing through over my dead body!!”

The guard kept on staring at Natsumi with hostility, adamantly blocking the path to the castle. It looked like the revelation only served to aggravate his already provoked guarding. But Shidou couldn't just abandon all hope like that; therefore, he retreated a few steps back and conversed with the others in a volume that was inaudible to the guard.

“This has become quite troublesome… We need to find a solution fast.”

“But… w-what are we supposed to do?”

Yoshino asked as she furrowed her eyebrows into an inverted V shape. Then, Nia raised her finger with an *ah* interjection.

“What if we deal with him like how we took care of the wolf, by feeding him Momotarou’s dumplings? Aren't those super effective against dogs, monkeys and chickens? Humans and monkeys don't have many differences between them, so shouldn't it work?”

“No, even if it did, he's already marked us as suspicious. There's no way he'd eat something from us. Will he let us in if we change our clothes into something more decent like what Natsumi wore before?”

Kotori issued an astringent expression towards Shidou’s suggestion.

“But how will we get the dresses? Sorry but I don't even have a single penny on me. I almost froze to death because of that. I only have some cakes and matches left—”

Kotori seemed to have thought of a method that just might work as she stopped her words and held her chin.

“Un? What's wrong, Kotori?”

“...Everyone, can you come over here for a while?”

As she led everyone away from the castle's gate, the guard heaved a sigh of annoyance and swung his arms like he was shooing a stray dog.

“Hey where are we going, Kotori?”

“Don't mind that, just come along.”

Kotori followed the road for a while and came across some vegetation which looked like thin pieces of disused timber. She ripped the lower hem of her skirt off and rolled the fabric around the chip of wood, ingeniously making a torch on the spot.

“That's…”

“If only I had some oil to dip this in… well this should last for some time,”

Kotori said that while shrugging her shoulders in disappointment. She then took out a single match from the box in her other hand and chanted something with closed eyes, igniting the torch. Kotori’s attire, after being shone by the flame, transformed into a bright scarlet dress.

“Uah! This is…!”

Shidou exclaimed in awe. The Yamai sisters clapped their hands like an ovation.

“So that's how! The Little Match Girl’s mirages!”

“Comprehension. This indeed looks realistic.”

That being said, even Kaguya’s and Yuzuru’s clothing instantly transformed into splendiferous dresses, full of elegance and grandeur. Not only had theirs, but all the Spirits under the torch’s light had their attires beautified to the extent that they resembled rich nobles.

“Oh! Amazing!”

“So… beautiful.”

The Spirits each vociferated their astonishment loudly. Although they were unaware of the mechanics of this phenomenon, it was enough to fool the guard’s eyes. However, Shidou’s forehead was sweating anxiously when his vision fell upon himself.

“Why am I also wearing a dress…?”

That's right; even Shidou’s clothes had turned into a splendid skirt. There was even makeup put on his face, and his hair length reached his waist. He appeared to be Shidou’s female counterpart, Shiori-chan.

“I think a girl would be more likely to be granted entry to the ball that Cinderella was going to. Isn't Prince-sama searching for a partner in marriage from the many aristocratic families? No offense though.”

“Is that true?”

Shidou enquired as if he was acting. Meanwhile, Kotori nonchalantly replied with a usual *hai, hai*.

Although there were some unexpected mishaps, Shidou had no other choice. He deeply sighed in earnest and followed Kotori to the royal castle with determination.

Chapter 5 - Hero

“Ooh!”

Tohka, whose dazzling semblance was spectacularly ameliorated by the phenomenal mirage-matches, broadened her two twinkling eyes as she studied the interior of the palace's exhibitory special-purpose hall. She wasn't alone, as the Yamai sisters and Yoshino also vividly exposed their ardent enthusiasms while they inspected the gallery-like court in enthrallment.

Of course, that couldn't be helped. Shidou and the other Spirits were currently located inside the lavishly sumptuous party hall within the royal castle - a place which only existed within imaginary fairy tales.

The crystal chandelier which sparkled in glorious splendor like rare diamonds perfectly complemented the velvety vermillion carpet that impeccably bore no flaws. Even the marble pillars and the lofty stairways were designed with an exquisite avant-garde touch which put even the most refined aristocratic mansions to shame. Atop the grand oak table, that could easily be mistaken by peasantry commoners to be a ceremonial article used for holy rituals, were luxurious culinary delicacies and exotic gourmet food.

The majority of the people who gathered there were mostly from families of noble lineage or descendants of renowned craftsmen and scholars. Everyone attending the ball was wearing classy, à la mode attires and was playfully bantering with each other in eloquent miens.

Shidou and the others had heavily relied on Kotori’s sudden inspiration and finally succeeded in surmounting the guard of the castle's gate. Despite this, the guard was still profoundly befuddled when he saw them. They were a group of shabbily-dressed people that suddenly re-appeared in distinguished formal clothing out of nowhere. A modicum of doubt and suspicion did arise, especially since the guard had memorized their facial features obliquely, but that was all.

“Ah everyone, I understand your state of minds, but don't wander too far. If you go out of the flame’s range, your true self will be revealed. Especially you, Tohka. You'll turn into Japan’s number one in an instant. Before that, bringing a katana to a VIP party is anything but reassuring.”

Kotori informed them as she raised the emergency torch.

“Umu! Understood!”

Tohka replied with plenty of vitality.

However, a few seconds later, next to Tohka, the Yamai sisters defiantly charged out of the flame's limited range instead.

"Uohh?!"

"Predicament. How unfortunate."

Kaguya's and Yuzuru's beautiful dresses instantly reverted back to the ragged patchy clothing that their representative characters had worn. The two let out unusual yells of bewilderment and speedily swayed their bodies like trained gymnasts, coordinately leaping backwards afterwards.

In spite of the fact that a few participants had their utmost attentions unimaginably evoked by the Yamai sisters' elicited yelps, Hansel and Gretel were not witnessed by any of them owing to the brevity of the two's evanescent affair. Observing the volatile scene from afar, Kotori sighed in a rather derogatory manner.

"Really, didn't I say to be careful? It wasn't easy for us to sneak in here."

"S-Sorry…"

"Apology. I will exercise caution hereafter."

Disheartened, both of them reverently lowered their heads to express their remorseful regrets. Kotori could only shrug her shoulders helplessly.

"Alright… anyway, where's the said mermaid princess?"

"Uu… I can't see anything like that around here."

Just as Shidou keenly glanced around the expansive hall, an anonymous figure could be seen conceitedly approaching him out of the corner of his eyes.

"——Good evening, pretty Miss."

"Ah?"

The unexpected salutation caused Shidou to turn his line of sight towards the source. Before his eyes was a confident youth wearing a swallow-tailed coat, carrying himself with ease and natural poise.

“May I have this dance?”

The youth gently smiled and extended his hand deferentially. Seeing this, Shidou looked towards Kotori instead.

“Haha, he's asking you out. You're rather well-received Kotori. Onii-chan is jealous.”

Yet the youth unfathomably shook his head and gazed directly into Shidou’s eyes while opening his mouth once again.

“N-Not the little lady over there, I'm referring to you.”

“....Ah?”

Hearing the youth's words, Shidou grimaced in perplexity. But he promptly recalled that his current appearance had been transformed into the cute Shiori-chan through of Kotori’s matches. However, Shidou had absolutely no interest in partaking in a dance with another male. Moreover, if he accidentally went out of the match’s reach during the waltz like dance, he would immediately return to his original male self. This kind of matter couldn't even happen to Cinderella.

“.....Not her?”

Shidou, in cold sweat, pointed to Kotori, to which the youth shrugged his shoulders as if to say ‘you're joking’.

“Such a humorous Miss, but that pitiful little lady over there will feel bad. See that tasty cake on the table there? Why don't you go eat a slice or two?”

The youth ludicrously ridiculed Kotori, as if he was coaxing an upset child. In a split second, blue veins could be seen popping out of her temples angrily.

“W-What did you say?!”

“H-Hey calm down, Kotori.”

Not wanting to trigger any tumultuous disturbances there, Shidou hurriedly restrained his furious sister's shoulders. Just in time, a woman who appeared to be the Master of Ceremonies emerged on the grand stage situated inside the room, verbosely making a speech to all the guests present.

"——May I have your attention please. In a moment, we shall be given the privilege to witness, in person, a seldom seen mermaid princess' enchanting serenade!"

Hearing the statement, the entire assembly hall vehemently flared up with ebullient exuberance. Even the youth who had invited Shidou just now was zestfully viewing the raised platform in high spirits.

"L-Let's go, Kotori. There's our objective, we should look for a better position."

"Hmph, fine. Let's go, everyone."

Kotori did not hesitate to blatantly show a resentful expression as she beckoned everyone else to head for an advantageous stead. Following closely, the curtains on the stage slowly unfolded left and right, little by little. Instantly, the vast hall was enveloped by noisy excitement and passionate sighs.

"Wow…"

"A real mermaid!"

"So beautiful…"

Perhaps the theatrical scenery served to imitate the coastal seaside. The stage was nicely decorated with water and a beach, along with some large sandy stones scattered here and there. Atop one of the rocks sat a lovable young girl whose body had the exterior appearance of a fish from waist down. She possessed slightly wet hair and a swimsuit made out of polished shells; brightly smooth skin and a moist pair of eyes. It was self-explanatory; she was the very epitome of the fairy-tale Mermaid Princess.

However.

"Kyaa—?! Where is this place—! Where's Darling!? Where did everyone go—?!"

She was the Spirit who also got swallowed into that oneiric world along with Shidou and the others, Miku.

Miku haphazardly flicked her tail fin while cacophonously shrieking with a loud, blood-curdling scream. She was undoubtedly unparalleled in beauty, yet utterly spoiled in many ways.

“Quiet down, you have an audience.”

“Even if you say that…”

Miku puckered up her eyebrows with indignation and embarrassedly said so. The emcee then continued whispering into Miku’s ear.

“Now now, struggling is useless since you've been purchased by our generous King. You should serve the King by singing a song. I heard that mermaids have very pleasant voices, so let these honored guests who've come from distant lands indulge in your mellifluous singing.”

“I refuse! Although my voice is the *best*, I didn't agree to serve some company producer or some King that I don't know! I don't work for things that have nothing to do with me!!”

Miku yelled as she arbitrarily turned her head to one side.

Miku’s defiant rebuttal caused a rather confused uproar among the populous crowd in the hall. The emcee, who thought that it wasn't too encouraging to allow such a rebellious attitude towards the King to be seen in public, put on an incisive look and fiercely glared at Miku.

“You're the castle's property now. If you aren't obedient, the King will not be pleased.”

“Hmph! I don't care!”

“Well can't do anything about it. A mermaid that won't sing is good for nothing. Go be tomorrow's soup stock then.”

“Waa! Miku likes to sing!”

Dreading being stewed into fish soup, Miku made an effort to smile obsequiously. Watching the whole argument, Shidou feebly forced a wry laugh.

“Captured again huh… Miku.”

“Un. Looks like she was sucked into the fairy tale, Mermaid Princess…. Is this how the story goes though?”

Kotori was utterly flummoxed by the unorthodox turn of events, replying to Shidou while inclining her head to one side.

In any case, they weren't going to let Miku become the soup stock just like that, she was already miserably pitiful to be compelled to sing unwillingly so Shidou and the others advanced a few steps forward towards the stage. At that time, Miku finally noticed their striking presence and opened her eyes, filled with hope.

“...Darling! Everyone! Are you okay…”

“Yeah, we're fine. We heard that there was a mermaid princess in the castle so we came to visit…”

“Ah….! Where did you find such fancy dresses! And Darling is Shiori-san!? Ah! Ah! I wanna listen to the detailed development!!!! Did you record any notes?!”

She resembled a stranded fish put back into the water. Miku’s eyes glistened rather lustfully as she flapped her tail fin on the water surface nonstop. Although her vivacity wasn't detrimental, the whole matter wouldn't be settled so easily. Shidou spread out his arms in order to sober up Miku.

“C-Calm down… Anyway, how did you end up like that?”

Shidou asked sweat oozed out from his forehead.

“I was already like this when I woke up in the sea. When I was searching for everyone, a wicked witch approached me and offered to turn me human in exchange for my voice.”

“Oh, so that's how it is.”

Shidou advertently nodded his head in acknowledgement towards Miku’s case. Indeed, her featured story did vaguely adhere to the plot of the fairy tale, Mermaid Princess. Impression-wise, however, the mermaid princess was supposed to fall in love at first sight with a handsome prince on land and seek the witch for a forbidden method to become human. At least, that's how the storyline develops. [1]

“But if you're still mermaid that means…”

“That's right. Hard to believe that witch tried to steal my voice. When I declined and wanted to leave, she even kept bugging me to death! So I smashed her with my tail once and she ran away.”

Miku said this with a grin.

Shidou could only go with the flow and laugh along *ahaha* at Miku’s coup de théâtre. Although the witch didn't know inside information, the deal she unknowingly proposed was simply too foolish. Miku was a popular idol and simultaneously a talented vocalist; therefore, her voice equaled her life. There was no way that she'd accept the trade.

“But… when I tried to find you guys in this state, I got caught by some fishermen on the shore…”

Shidou comprehended her situation and nodded acquiescently. True, her appearance was rather conspicuous and had made it difficult for her to flee on land. As he and Miku talked, the emcee that had been glaring at Shidou and the others from the beginning raised an objection.

“...Monsieur, is there a problem with this mermaid?”

“Ah it's like this. She's actually our friend, can you release her?” requested Shidou bluntly.

“Friend…the mermaid? I find that hard to believe. Even if that is true, she already belongs to the King. I cannot accept your demand, so please give up.

The woman replied back in a stern tone.

“H-How can you be so unreasonable? What about Miku’s free will?”

“It doesn't matter with that kind of creature. She doesn't need a will since the King owns her.”

The cheerless host warned them in a desolate manner, causing the Spirits behind Shidou to take offence from her deliberate wordings and expose penetrating gazes.

“Uu… you don't need to be so rude.”

“E-Exactly…! Miku-san isn't something for display!”

“Ah but, a line like ‘You're mine, you don't have the right to refuse’ has an air of a Shōjo manga. Touching, right? In my opinion, it depends on the speaker. Boy, try saying that.”

“...Don't make things complicated, shut up Nia,”

Natsumi said so half-heartedly, causing a chuckle from Nia.

“.....”

The host pursed her eyebrows in annoyance towards their refusal to comply, and clapped her hands a few times.

“Guards! These ladies shall be going now. Please see them off prudently.”

Immediately afterwards, a number of armored guards responded to her call and surrounded the group, making a clamor as they resonated throughout the hall.

“Wha….!”

“Heh? Dare you disrupt peace?”

“Challenge. We will be forced to use force.”

The Yamai sisters’ expressions morphed into merciless frowns. The two adopted an offensive stance, slightly leaning forward as if ready to kill at any moment. The wary guards were alerted in response and assumed an encirclement formation.

“Haha, you have quite the nerve. Very well, those that feign fearlessness towards Death, bring it on! Even without our angels we won't lose to scum like you!”

“Request. Allow Yuzuru and Kaguya to slaughter open a bloody path. We'll leave Miku to Shidou and the others.”

Shidou let out a bitter look. He was against the obligatory usage of violence, but now that the state of affairs had deteriorated to such an irreversible extent, there was nothing he could do about it.

“Uh… I guess we don't have a choice. Everyone!”

“Ooh!”

“Alright!”

The Spirits collectively shouted a courageous war cry. Tohka unsheathed her blade from its scabbard and Nia skillfully reloaded her dual pistols. However, through Kotori’s magical matches, those deadly weapons took on the deceptive façade of being mere bouquets of harmless flowers. Nevertheless, both factions entered their respective battle formations and the scene brimmed with tension on the verge of eruption. If another turning point were to decisively reoccur, a fight would undoubtedly break out.

On the contrary, someone else spoke at that time.

“....What's the meaning of all this raucous disorder?”

An austere voice reverberated throughout the combat-stricken ambience from the spiraling flight of stairs leading to the upper levels.

“.....!”

As the unyielding voice reached the emcee’s ears, she inconceivably widened her now startled eyes in a flustered manner. Meanwhile, all the stares and gazes in the hall converged at the source of the articulate enunciation.

“H-Hey…”

“Isn't that——”

“It can't be… how lucky am I to be granted the opportunity to witness with my own eyes…!”

All the party participants gave out amazed yells of overwhelming surprise while the host could only lower her head in deep veneration towards the revered voice, as if she was suffocated by the intoxicating utterance.

“Forgive my impertinence, Your Majesty. Some uncouth commoners have come to wrest away Your mermaid, that is fully Yours in all entirety. My humble self wishes to banish them, and banish them I shall, with immediacy.”

“Your Majesty?!”

Shidou abruptly lifted his head in shock towards the woman's words, moreover her completely disparate attitude. That was to be expected. The King was the master of the castle. That meant that every guard there obeyed the King, and that the King was Miku’s owner - lucky. If they could persuade the King, then perhaps they could somehow subdue the escalating dispute.

“A-About that! We are… the mermaid’s friends! So….. eh?

Shidou argumentatively debated as if he was pouring out his innermost grievances, only to brusquely cease his speech halfway through. The reason was simple. The King looked extremely familiar to him.

“O-Origami?!”

Shidou couldn't help but shout loudly. Before his eyes stood Origami, who was wearing a high-grade loose red overcoat and a jeweled royal crown on her head.

“——Shidou.”

Origami declared tranquilly while observing the condition of the hall. She nodded with keen insight of the circumstances, and let her overcoat flutter leisurely in the wind.

The next moment, Shidou and all the Spirits widened their eyes with shuddering shoulders, except for Miku who exclaimed an *ahh*. It couldn't be helped. After all, under the red overcoat, Origami didn't have a single stitch of clothing on. Yet she showed no trace of bashfulness or embarrassment on her face and even unhurriedly descended the stairs with a complacent expression.

“I-Is that the rumored…?”

“Y-Yeah… What a fantastic dress!”

“E-Exactly! Simply mystifying!”

Quite a stir was once again created in the room, but the dialogues seemed rather forced compared to before, almost in sarcastic manner. Origami didn't have the slightest care about the satirical uproar and merely forged ahead towards the raised platform. She exaggeratedly swayed her overcoat as if issuing a manifesto.

“They are my guests. No harm towards them is permitted. Return to your respective posts.”

“B-But….”

“Do I have to repeat myself?”

Origami distorted her countenance as she glared fixedly into the self-deprecating host’s eyes, causing the woman's body to shiver in fear.

“Uh…! M-My deepest apologies!”

The host deeply bowed her head once again and withdrew together with the guards. After intently seeing them leave, Origami shifted her vision towards Shidou and the others.

“Shidou, everyone, good to see you're okay.”

“Y-Yeah… are you… uh… fine as well?”

Shidou didn't know where to look as his eyes frantically darted everywhere. Origami naively tilted her head, unaware of what Shidou was ambiguously hinting at.

“I don't understand what you mean.”

“Ah… you didn't encounter any… plunderers, did you?”

Just as Shidou was measuring his words tactfully, Tohka bolted upright and pointed at Origami straightforwardly.

“O-Origami! What happened to your clothes?! You aren't wearing anything!”

The next moment, a storm of protest brewed inside the hall.

“That lass… how dare she say something so audacious!”

“Talking ill of the King's clothes like that… she'll be hanged for sure!”

Frightening utterances and suchlike could be heard from all four quarters of the crowded room, far and near. What kind of tyrannical, despotic rule did Origami ruthlessly implement to inflict such terrified veneration and fearful reverence upon the hearts of her subservient followers? However, that was presumably a nontrivial matter of which was caused by the storyline that Origami was intermingled with, and she wasn't necessarily responsible for the outcome. Nevertheless, Origami didn't even look like she detested Tohka’s impudent statement in any way. On the contrary, Origami barefacedly shook her head as if she was sympathizing with poor Tohka.

“This was purchased from a travelling tailor. My clothes are invisible to those who do not love Shidou. If you are unable to see it, then that means, Tohka… you…”

“Wha…!? W-Wait a moment!”

Tohka objected in a hurry as she glued her eyes onto Origami’s body.

“U-Uun… this is… a beautiful skin colored outfit!”

“You don't need to force yourself, Tohka.”

Kotori consoled her while gently patting Tohka’s shoulders.

“Origami, you've been fooled. No matter how you look at it, those are The Emperor's New Clothes.”

“.....”

Origami remained motionless for a short period of time, and then closely tightened the front of her overcoat afterwards. On a side note, Miku was bawling, ‘Ahh let me see some more!’

The Emperor's New Clothes. The emperor was fraudulently tricked into buying ‘clothes that fools cannot see’ by a couple of dressmakers, making a fool of himself instead. It

was a rather well-known fairy tale that even Japanese people would have definitely heard of, however.

“I didn't notice at all,”

Origami muttered in an emotionless tone.

“Don't you guys think it's quite passable?”

“They told me that people who cannot understand love cannot see it, so I bought it in advance.”

“I-Is that so…? Scary how a wizard's imagination is.”

Kotori grimaced while subconsciously wiping sweat off her forehead.

“Well, now that we've found everyone, it's about time we look for a way out of this world. Although our perceptions of time are different from the external world, a rather long period of time has passed since we came here.”

Kotori sequentially shifted her gaze towards Miku and Origami as she continued explaining the elaborate intricacies of the Adjacent World to them, roughly summarized of course, and posed a doubtful query.

“The both of you were transported to two different locations, right? Up until that point, did you encounter any characters that might be able to escape this world or maybe any items that could have the same effect?”

Origami and Miku briefly faced each other for a short moment, and strongly shook their heads in denial afterwards.

“Nothing special.”

“I didn't see anyone too, ah except for the witch and fishermen.”

“I see…”

She didn't expect anything bright or outstanding, but Kotori couldn't help but sigh regrettably with disappointment. The next moment, a narrow window of hope unraveled as Origami continued her speech.

“Currently, I am the ruler of this country, and can issue a nationwide announcement. I should be able to order the citizens to search for something similar to that.”

“Good idea, power in numbers huh. This way is far more efficient than us looking everywhere. I'll leave it to you then.”

“Understood. But what should we search for, specifically?”

Origami inquired, to which Nia was the one who answered this time.

“Uu—Yeah, this world is pretty open to broad interpretations in the first place, so I think relics or treasures which grant wishes exist here. Like Aladdin’s magic lamp or One-Inch Boy’s little hammer. Even though both manga and video games have dimension-transcending espers, the former’s more popular so we should have a higher chance.” [2]

“Alright then. I'll immediately——”

At that very moment, the moment Origami responded.

A deafening resonance of shattering glass loudly echoed throughout the filled hall as a gigantic wolf vigorously collided with the castle's fragile window casements, crashing the entire party in a rampage.

“H-Hyaaaaa!”

“A monster!”

Confronted with the unanticipated violent intrusion of a grotesque, disproportionate monstrosity, all of the ball attendants screamed in horror and chaotically fled in all directions. The wolf brutally shoved away each and every being, living or otherwise, in its unstoppable path of berserk destruction. Unwarily, Kotori’s torch dropped onto the adequately furnished floor.

“Ah….!”

The makeshift brand was actually just a broken piece of disused wood extemporaneously wrapped in a thin strip of cotton cloth, and was on the brink of extinguishing. Fortunately, the fire didn't set the flammable carpet ablaze and burned out instead, leaving a faint black trail of charred smoke.

In an instant, Shidou and the others who had been masterfully disguised by the flame's illumination returned to their original selves. Be that as it may, their attires constituted the least of their concerns at that time, as an even more pressing obstacle had appeared before them out of nowhere. Without even a minuscule shred of regard or interest towards the frenziedly fleeing participants, the wolf ferociously charged at Shidou and the others straightaway.

"Hoh, I have repaid your petty kindness just now. How dare you little pigs treat me like some dog that runs errands willy-nilly?!"

The wolf acrimoniously howled with rancorous animosity, to which Shidou could only furrowed his eyebrows in utmost confusion, inquisitively wondering what he did to provoke such enmity from the wolf.

"The wolf from before….!? Why, didn't you eat Tohka's dumpling and turn good?!"

"Hah! I had digested that stuff long, long ago and expurgated it already!"

The wolf barked as it patted its belly.

"The dumplings use that kind of system!?"

Shidou was unable to refrain from shouting his reluctance aloud. At that time, the castle's guards finally arrived and quickly aimed their barbed spears at the wolf, one by one.

"Your Majesty, please retreat!"

"Leave this to us!"

However.

"Don't get too full of yourselves, weaklings!!"

The wolf mightily swept its frontal limb, which was the size of a fully grown tree, and effortlessly knocked a whole rank of soldiers airborne as a result, sending them crashing against the opposite wall along with the grand table and everything on it.

“Woah… as expected of an adaptation. Tohka-chan, try giving it another one of your millet dumplings!”

Nia instructed as she cautiously pulled out her loaded dual pistols. Tohka then inserted her hand into the packed bag which hung freely on her waist.

“Un, ready. Wolf, eat this!”

Tohka threw the millet dumpling with all the strength she could muster at the wolf's gaping mouth. But, just as the dumpling was about to enter the wolf's waiting mouth, it was abruptly stopped in midair as if time had been momentarily suspended.

“Wha….?”

Tohka yelled as her bleak situation fell into a disadvantageous predicament.

In that space, the shadowy figure of an old woman, who possessed a crooked nose and wore a matt-black robe, slowly floated into physical appearance.

“Hihihi, pathetic wolf. Carelessness shall be your demise.”

The hideous woman ridiculed the wolf as she cruelly crumbled the caught dumpling into countless bits, inexplicably sending a cold chill down Shidou’s spine.

Witnessing the malign occurrence, the Yamai sisters held their breaths with considerable trepidation.

“U-Uahh! It's that aged hag!”

“Shock. She's the elderly woman who lives in the candy house.”

The Mephistophelean witch's sinister sneer grew even more horrifying. The slithering snake named Fear sluggishly crept up the twins’ legs whilst constricting their remaining power with great intensity, and gradually ascended their svelte abdomens till their faces paled.

“Hihihihi…. In the flesh, abominable Hansel and Gretel. Your insolent souls shall cauterize in the Devil's mordacious hellfire for gourmandizing on my dwelling! Pity, I had graciously pardoned the thinness of your tender bodies and hoped to consume you plumped, but restraints will be of little utility to pardon you so graciously now!”

“Ahahaha! Hale and hearty despite the years eh, ancient human? Keep your filthy hands off my prey, this little pig and red riding hood!”

The wolf roared with avaricious, mocking laughter. Kotori’s expression inevitably became severe.

“Kuh… the wolf alone is more than enough, let alone a witch!”

“Heh? You seemed to have misunderstood something.”

“What did you say…?”

Kotori creased her eyebrows in disbelief as the wolf haughtily scoffed till the corners of its lips extended to its ears.

“——Who ever said that that was all?”

As the wolf finished its condescending intimidation, an immense volume of concentrated seawater spontaneously poured through the previously broken glass windows.

“Wha….!? This is…!”

The arcane brine looked as if it darkened the party hall somehow, and unexpectedly swelled into an irregular shape - the form of an ancient mermaid. Seeing the ghostly scene, Miku immediately pointed her finger at the ostentatious apparition.

“Ahh! You! The witch that tried to steal my voice!”

“...Hahaha, correct. I come to return the slap on my face that you gave me! Not only will I plunder your voice, I'll cut off your tongue as well!”

The ocean witch let out a contemptuous scorn. It seemed that the antagonistic villains from every story who bore spiteful grudges against Shidou and the others had collectively joined their evil forces in order to seek out vengeance.

Following closely was the seismic rumblings of gargantuan footsteps, which roughly mimicked the magnitude of several tremendous earthquakes combined. A brutish ogre which wore a loose loincloth made out of a skinned tiger pelt powerfully lifted a crude iron club and wrecked the castle's wall into rubble, barging into the hall.

“Uah… could this be the Oni from the demon island!?”

Tohka said with quivering shoulders as the ogre viciously bared its fang-like teeth.

“Ouf coorse! Me wait and wait and wait... forr you BITCH but neeever comme to me so me comme to youu!!”

“You obviously have nothing to do with us and came by yourself!!”

Shidou couldn't help but verbally express his discontented misgivings towards the obnoxious ogre’s absurd l’esprit de l’escalier. The forest and ocean witches had their own reasons for amassing such intense hatred against Shidou and the others, but by the looks of it, that mentally-challenged ogre had simply never even met with Tohka before.

But the madness didn't end there. As the formerly changed wolf's partners in crime gathered one after another in the castle's hall, the now unguarded gates suddenly opened, revealing three spoiled women wearing over the top ball gowns, with hearts rotten to the core.

“Ohohoho! Cinderella! You think an overrated girl like you can attend the ball?”

“Cinderella’s stepmother and stepsisters…?! Ah, although you guys are just remakes who don't stand a chance, why are you being lumped with the witches and ogre there!?”

An underage youngster then naturally entered the room, for reasons unknown.

“The king's naked… because I said this; my father got thrown in prison. But I'll keep saying the truth, the king's naked!”

“Was there something so serious in the story!?”

The next instant, a massive fireball manifested in the sky, and within the flame emerged a bereaved ghost whose dark eyes reflected no light.

“O granddaughter… ignite all your matches… and reunite with me…”

“The Little Match Girl's grandmother turned into an evil spirit?!”

Shidou exclaimed with a shocked demeanor.

A colony of innumerable bats flocked into the hall through the shattered windows, assembling into a humanoid form. The moist surface of the wetted floor then perpendicularly bulged into a zombie corpse, furthermore an indescribable, nerve-racking monstrosity which drove onlookers insane by mere sight manifested from the shadows.

“T-This is…”

“Ah, that one's mine. The vampire from Chapter 1 • Nosferatu, the living corpse from Chapter 2 • Undead Lord, and the unknown entity from Chapter 3 • Ancestral Deity—Silver Bullet’s atypical massacre. This popular work of action and fantasy, 《Silver Bullet》, is currently being serialized in the weekly Shōnen Blast!”

“That's why Shōnen manga has violence issues!!”

Faced with Nia’s shameless advertising, Shidou longingly pined to scream at the top of his lungs. Inside the vast party hall, gathered irrational freaks and evil villains from every plot. Furthermore, they had already surrounded the perimeter around Shidou and the others in order to prevent any escape attempts, slowly closing down the distance apart with each step.

“Uh….!”

The overwhelming pressure exerted on them was completely incomparable to the castle guards’ formation before. That was to be expected. Right then, aside from a few distinct exceptions, the despicable, degenerate existences which forcefully encircled Shidou and the group were vile villains and alien monstrosities. In addition to the fiendish foes, their situation was invariably worsened by the fact that they were utterly incapable of utilizing their angels’ abilities, be it offensive or defensive. Each of their perishable bodies physiologically detected the life & death crisis presented in front of them, resulting in a quickened heart rate and heightened brain processes.

“We won't lose to the likes of you!”

As everyone stressfully tensed up with anxiety due to the unfavorable circumstances, Tohka alone yelled a loud battle cry and suddenly leaped into the air, pouncing on the enemy with her sharpened katana readily wielded.

“Haaaaaa!”

However, before her blade could even land an attack on the ogre, the witches to its right and left cast an offensive spell and energy projectiles. Their magic targeted her vulnerable body, setting off some minor explosions in the process.

“Ack!?”

Tohka groaned as she unbearably suffered heavy attacks from both her flanks. Seizing the onetime chance, the repulsive ogre exaggeratedly heaved its iron club and swung it at Tohka from above her head with great force.

“Hahahaha! Tooo naiive, Momotarou!”

“Uhh….!”

Tohka subconsciously instructed her feeble arms to somehow defend against the bone-crushing strike, but being in midair; she could not fruitfully exert any substantial force to move her hands and got savagely staggered onto the decorated floor.

“Tohka!!”

Shidou cried out her name with all his voice and rushed to protect her, or at least, he tried to. However.

“Letting your guard down is dangerous, little pig.”

As Shidou inadvertently heard the wolf's cold voice from above, his abdomen experienced an intense impact without warning.

“Uaah!?”

He immediately understood why - his body had been swept by the wolf's colossal arm. Shidou’s body flew across the capacious room, violently crashing into the hard wall and miserably falling onto the also hard floor afterwards.

“Ou… ch…”

“Shidou!”

“S-Shidou-san!”

All the Spirits cried out with distressed worry for him and attempted to approach Shidou with unbreakable conviction, only for that very conviction to be mercilessly nullified as the wolf and their other enemies sadistically blocked their determined path.

“Too bad, you won't be going anywhere.”

“Huh….!”

“Y-Yoshino….”

“I-It’ll be okay, Natsumi-san….”

The Spirits, some without resignation and some with uneasiness, earnestly snuggled close together. The antipathetic bad guys who neatly stood in a blockading row perceptively smelled this fear and laughed derisively, drawing nearer by the second.

“Prepare yourselves to be feasted upon!”

“Hihihihihi… Loosen up; I shall eat you from head to toe!”

“Kehehe, wonder what a mermaid’s tongue will sound like.”

“H-hyaa-…!”

Miku screamed in response while shutting her mouth tight.

However, Miku wasn't the only one compulsively shivering and trembling in fear. Despite their uncommon reactions overall, everyone was sweating profusely as they helplessly awaited the approaching monsters as if they had been condemned to the soulless guillotine.

“Kuh… bastards!”

Shidou muttered with his remaining strength as he supported his body forcefully.

“Don't you dare… lay your hands on them!”

However, Shidou’s emaciated body, being crashed destructively against the wall, was utterly unable to act according to his sheer willpower no matter how resolute, and his lethargic legs soon surrendered to fatigue, rendering his lower body completely paralyzed on the watery ground.

“Uah….!”

In spite of his twisted expression, Shidou decisively gritted his teeth and endured the excruciating agony. He pitifully clawed at the ground with his still functional hands, sluggishly crawling towards the Spirits, but it was already too late. The nefarious villains had already beaten him to it.

“Ahahahaha! Let's start with you!”

“Kya….!”

“Y-Yoshino! D-Don't touch her you disgusting dog!”

The wolf dexterously controlled its paw and pinched Yoshino off the ground with its fingers. Despite Natsumi firmly clinging onto its thigh, the wolf simply feigned ignorance and sized Yoshino up in terms of edibility.

“Un un, looks scrumptious, little red riding hood!”

“Uu….”

“Ahh! Eating Yoshinon will give you a stomachache!”

“Kuh….!”

If that went on, it'd really be too late. Shidou’s heart fretfully pulsated. Even if he could somehow catch up to them, the number of things he could actually do was extremely limited. At most, he could only hope to stall them for some time. It was futile, for someone who had been effortlessly hurled away by the wolf and was in the process of letting Yoshino be eaten.

That moment he realized that point.

All of a sudden, the meaningful verses Mukuro had spoken through the communicator intermittently flashed through Shidou’s wavering mind.

‘...If thou hath sealed me, couldst thou also ensure my protection? Hath thy sealed Spirits never sustained another fiendish foray?’

“.....”

Shidou weakly extended his hand to reach for Tohka and the others, not stopping for even a single moment.

“I….”

The Spirits who had their powers purposely sealed by Shidou himself were currently being assaulted by various terrifying monsters. There existed only one cause for that, only one reason, which was fluttering through Shidou’s dim consciousness as he pondered about his actions. If he hadn't sealed their spirit power, perhaps they could have stood a chance against Westcott’s <Beelzebub>. No, it wasn't limited to that occasion alone. Like Mukuro had said, Tohka and the other Spirits had been plunged, time after time, into numerous perils in the past. Shidou had sealed their powers in order to save them, but conversely, for this very reason had Shidou unknowingly endangered their lives as well. His aching heart felt as if it had been shattered into pieces. Had he been doing the right thing all this time? Or was saving Spirits just some insignificant medium to fuel his egoism like Mukuro had said?

“——Hey, it's not like you to worry like that.”

At that time, a nostalgic voice which seemed to have fully seen through Shidou’s personal thoughts and emotions resounded from somewhere.

“Hm….?”

“Huh….?”

The confused utterances of Shidou’s bewilderment and the wolf's perplexity overlapped.

“What's going on? That sound just now—”

The wolf, with one paw securely holding Yoshino in midair, looked around for the source of that voice with perturbation. However, just as its line of sight moved away from Yoshino…

“...Wha….!?”

A straight line streaked down the wolf's arm, obliquely dividing that limb into two adjacent sections.

“T-This is, impossible!”

“Yaa….!”

Accompanied with the wolf's painful cries, Yoshino’s petite body was dropped towards the floor, along with the animal's severed limbs.

Then, just before her body could touch the ground.

“—Are you okay, Yoshino?”

Before her appeared a familiar boy who gently caught her falling body.

“Eh? T-That….”

Yoshino puzzled expressively as she tilted her head in order to briefly glimpse the boy's appearance. No, Yoshino wasn't the only one.

“Eh….?”

“H-How can this be?”

The other Spirits, as well as Itsuka Shidou himself, had all their attentions purely focused on the familiar boy and widened their glistening eyes impassively. Although so, their unforeseen reactions were undoubtedly inevitable. After all, the boy was expertly wielding a lengthy broadsword which was unquestionably Tohka’s very own, <Sandalphon>.

“Alright, you villains. Allow me, the guardian of the Spirits, *Itsuka Shidou*, to take you on!”

The facial features of the undaunted person who fearlessly said so, no matter from what perspective one looked at it, perfectly resembled Shidou himself.

“W-Who the devil are you supposed to be?! Suddenly appearing like that and speaking stupid—”

The wolf questioned as it looked at its chopped off limb with lachrymosity and angrily glared at *Shidou*.

However, *Shidou* failed to even grant the wolf the opportunity to disquietingly do so and raised <Sandalphon> with an executioner's pose. The next moment, the wolf's entire enormous body was instantly sliced into two halves with one clean slash of the broadsword.

"Gah… Gaaaaaah!"

Leaving behind a deafening shriek, the wolf's severed body mystically transformed into torn book pages, drifting in the wind until it eventually fell onto the ground. Witnessing the vindictive slaughter that occurred right before them, the remaining villains held their breaths in awe as the tables turned against them.

"Wha….! Wolf was…?!"

"You… what winds blow such a divine warrior to these lands?!"

The two wicked witches wailed while trembling with absolute fright. *Shidou* curved his lips into a genuine smile.

"I'm just a high school student who happened to be passing by."

Shidou replied to him while determinedly trampled on the damp floor and spontaneously charged at the debilitated enemies with <Sandalphon> ready in his hand.

He deflected the horrendous witches' cursed spells, fleetly sliced the iron club without any resistance, and punctured a wide hole in the ogre's deformed body. The wretched ogre gave out an earthshaking screech similar to the wolf's dying throes, and transformed into torn pieces of paper. However, *Shidou's* unstoppable force did not cease there. He fluidly channeled his physical power into his hands and feet, directly manipulating <Sandalphon> with grace as he engaged in combat with what was left of the pathetic villains.

Shidou blankly surveyed the surreal scene.

"W-What's happening…?"

"Shidou!"

Tohka and the other Spirits quickly rushed to his aid after the once blocked path was subtly cleared.

"Are you okay, Shidou? Did you get hurt?!"

"N-No, I'm fine. More importantly, who's that…"

Shidou once again perplexedly gazed at the *Shidou* who was currently fending off their sworn enemies. Kotori then similarly furrowed her eyebrows with incredulity.

“That's you for sure… Say, are you able to use shadow clone jutsu, Shidou?”

“No, I don't remember ever apprenticing a ninja…”

Shidou chuckled as Nia then verbalized an *ah*, as if she had realized something remarkable whilst fumbling her chin.

“Could Boy #2 be a character in this world?”

“Eh…..?”

Shidou fumbled his chin in astonishment as well. Her words were quite sensible, frankly. Yet with that, another conflicting discrepancy would arise. They were trapped in an illusory world which comprised of multitudinous intertwined fairy tales. If Shidou wasn't included in the dramatis personae of a story, then character *Shidou* could only exist in——

“Aahhhh!”

At that moment, as Shidou mentally connected the congruent pieces of the puzzle up till there, Natsumi suddenly yelled in a loud voice that was rather unfitting of her petite stature.

“W-What’s wrong, Natsumi?”

“...I-I know him…! I know, that guy…!”

Natsumi pointed at the *Shidou*, who was flowingly performing a magnificent battle against the villains, with her quivering finger.

“You know him Natsumi?! Really?”

“Y-Yeah… actually, we all should! Because that guy, that *Shidou*... was the character we all drew in the manga last month!”

“!!!”

Shidou and the other Spirits firmly held their breaths in utter shock at her headstrong words. One did exist; a story which they had thought was nonexistent, a story that portrayed Itsuka Shidou as the main protagonist. Shidou and the others had schemed a plot where they collectively drawn a manga wherein Shidou unanimously played the leading character, in order to cajole Nia, who was unable to fall in love with anything other than 2D.

“B-But…wasn't that a joint effort? To be saved by such a hero… it's way too coincidental!”

Shidou exclaimed his protests, to which Nia gently shook her head.

“I've said it before, Boy. Works of literature have no limits when it comes to finished stories and may very well appear in this world. Moreover, the authors of that manga have all gathered here. Don't you think the chances are pretty high?”

Dressed in her very own original manga character, Nia excitedly continued.

“And that Boy #2, whether he's the real Itsuka Shidou or not, he's depicted in your joint effort as the strengthened Itsuka Shidou who saves Spirits in order to flatter me!”

“W-What does that imply?”

“Request. Please elaborate.”

The Yamai sisters lightly inclined their heads to express their confounded incomprehension towards Nia’s unceasing torrent of words. Thus, Nia resumed with a refreshed breath.

“In other words! He's the super-handsome, super-strong, ideal Boy sketched in everyone's hearts!”

As Nia finally ended her eccentric speech, *Shidou* brandished <Sandalphon> elegantly after annihilated the last of the manga enemies.

“Hu….”

He then briskly combed his hair and approached Shidou unhurriedly.

“Yo, everything alright, *me*?”

“Y-Yeah…”

Feeling completely unaccustomed to how he had never addressed other people in that manner before, Shidou made an effort to reply nonetheless.

“Thanks for saving me… *me*.”

“Haha, we sound like Kurumi.”

Shidou responded as he laughed merrily.

Shidou couldn't help but laugh along, as he was confronted with the intriguing sensation of viewing his reflection in a mirror.

“But… you guys are in quite a tight spot. For *us* to be here, I presume that this must be Westcott’s doing?”

Shidou asked with in a keenly manner.

Unaffected much by the extraordinary instance of two Shidous, Kotori bluntly nodded in affirmation.

“Un, I'll be straightforward since you're already aware of our situation. Do you know how we can return to our world? We need to go back fast.”

Shidou nodded, unperturbed.

“Oh, leave that to me.”

“Eh?!”

Kotor shouted in discombobulation. That was unavoidable, as *Shidou* had leisurely spoken without indicating even an ounce of hesitation.

“Y-You can help us?”

Kotori asked, as *Shidou* then impressively demonstrated <Sandalphon> and responded.

“Un. This world was created with an angel's power, and can likewise be destroyed with that same power. Even though I'm a fictional existence, in terms of this world, the angel I use is very real.”

However, *Shidou* continued:

“I can only open this world's exit. When everyone returns to the other world, Westcott may be there waiting for you.”

“Wha….!”

Kotori widened her eyes, unable to accept the fact that she hadn't thought of that fatal but probable possibility before.

“What do you want us to do? We need to hurry to Mukuro and—”

Just as Kotori’s serious expression began to turn pale.

“I predicted that this would happen!!”

Nia shouted loudly, as if interrupting Kotori's words.

"W-What Nia! You don't need to be so loud..."

"Ehehe, I've always wanted to try and say that line. How is it? Like a capable woman?"

"Are you kidding me…"

Kotori said with eyes asquint. Nia scratched her head bashfully, as if to say 'ahh sorry sorry'.

"I've made the required preparations so Boy #2, you don't need to worry. Can you open the exit immediately?"

"Hey, what are you saying, Nia? Even if we return to our original world, won't all our efforts up until now be wasted if we appear in front of Westcott?"

"Hehehe, no need to worry."

Nia swayed her finger like a metronome, and drew back the corners of her mouth.

"You see, before I got swallowed here, <Beelzebub> had activated in that world. <Rasiel> and <Beelzebub> are a single existence. Of course, it can also assume responsibility of the link between both worlds."

"That means…"

"Yup, unless that bastard stays there forever, the chances of meeting him are very low."

Nia winked her eye, and the Spirits happily cheered in unison.

"Awesome, Nia!"

"Haha, very able indeed."

"Praise. So you're not only a drunkard."

"Nyahaha, I'm embarrassed, praise me more."

Nia puffed out her chest complacently. *Shidou* then mightily propped <Sandalphon> up and shifted his vision to Shidou and the others.

"Alright, is now okay?"

"Un, if you would,"

As Kotori requested, the next moment, *Shidou* firmly nodded and closed his eyes in order to concentrate his energy, powerfully swinging <Sandalphon> down with a splitting momentum.

"——Hah!"

In an instant, a fierce gale of wind rippled from the sharp edge of <Sandalphon>'s divine blade, and a dimensional rift cracked open within the narrow crevice of space slashed by the holy sword.

"You should be able to go back through this passageway."

Shidou smiled warm-heartedly while supporting <Sandalphon> as it was fixedly on the ground.

"About the Mukuro whom you mentioned earlier, she's the new Spirit, right? Do your best, *me*; you definitely have to save her."

"....."

Hearing *Shidou's* sagacious words, which sounded familiar to Woodman's parting words; Shidou felt his continuous heartbeat jump abruptly.

"...What are you doing, Shidou? Let's go."

Kotori put on an inconceivable expression as she looked at her reticent brother in vexation and eagerly waited for everyone to arrive at the transcendental fissure.

"Thanks for saving us again, and take care of yourself, *Shidou*."

"Un, I'll send your regards to your counterparts in this world."

"Haha, I guess they're here too. Somehow that feels rather complicated,"

Kotori grinned as she waved him goodbye with her hand, and resolutely entered herself through the portal.

Following closely behind her, the Spirits each bade their grateful farewells to *Shidou* one after another as they entered into the rift. After everyone else had left, *Shidou* looked at Shidou.

"It's your turn, *me*. Go, they're waiting for you."

"Y-Yeah..."

Shidou concurringly abided to *Shidou's* friendly command and headed to the passageway. However, he suddenly stopped in his steps once again, as if his legs had been pinned to the floor.

——*Shidou*.

Via Shidou's and the Spirits' creative imaginations, the fictional *Shidou* was the ideal *Shidou* that specialized to save Spirits. Facing this *Shidou* in person, a certain tiny wish sprouted within Shidou's pulsating heart. There are everlasting state of minds that should have been mutually connected, and ephemeral entanglements that he should have been struggled free of. Yet these particular things still stubbornly floated at the bottom of Shidou's heart like precipitous sediments.

"Hey… *me*."

"Un? What's wrong, *me*?"

"What you said was right. I'll be going to the new Spirit's, Mukuro's side. But—"

Shidou slightly pursed his eyebrows as he stammered to narrate Mukuro's story while hemming and hawing. How he was coldly rejected, how he was blatantly accused of ignoring the Spirits' personal opinions, and how he was simply incapable of denying that at all.

"....."

Shidou let out an earnest expression as he attentively listened to Shidou's pathetic confession, and lightly exhaled.

"I see… another hard-to-convince Spirit huh?"

"...I have a belief. When everyone was being raided by the villains, I thought that if I hadn't sealed them, they wouldn't have been so helpless… No, of course, if I didn't do that, they'd be in greater trouble, but…"

He was unable to fairly conclude an equitable verdict out of his apparent thoughts. Shidou forcefully scratched his head and continued.

"...Sealing Mukuro's power. I don't harbor any complaints about that. If I don't, DEM will launch another attack. But… I don't know what to do… what's your opinion? Do you think I even have the right to stand before Mukuro even though I still have nothing to refute her with? Can the indecisive me open the lock to her heart…?"

The *Shidou* who had stayed consistently silent for a period of time started to move his mouth.

“—If it's *me*, I'd do it again.”

“But, Mukuro wishes to be undisturbed…”

“Although she says so, isn't it odd if you think about it more carefully? Saying that she locked her heart so that she wouldn't feel lonely, doesn't that sound like she can't bear the loneliness if she hadn't used her angel?”

“...That…was undoubtedly true.”

If Mukuro was unable to experience the depression of loneliness, the grief of sorrow and the displeasure of wrath from the beginning, then it would be essentially unnecessary to cruelly lock her heart and emotions in the first place. There was probably no need to tell Shidou this.

“What she had said, no matter how I look at it, it feels like an S.O.S. signal from Mukuro herself. Therefore, you must go no matter what she throws at you. By the way, don't you already have the key to unlock her locked heart?”

“Eh….?”

Hearing *Shidou's* words, Shidou inclined his head. In the twinkling of an eye, he immediately understood where the unobvious significance of that sentence lied.

“...Could it be…”

“Correct,”

The other *Shidou* nodded contentedly towards Shidou’s uncovered reaction.

“One more thing, you’ll need to regard it as a separate matter,”

Shidou said this whilst thrusting his fist onto Shidou’s chest.

“What are you thinking, *me*? Wasn't everything you just said about Mukuro? Although it's good to think about her, you won't notice her feelings with just that. Well, *me*, how are you going to treat Mukuro?”

“.....!”

Listening to *Shidou's* useful lecture, Shidou abruptly held his breath. After a few seconds of silence, Shidou deeply inhaled, and exhaled again.

“...Un—Alright….Okay.”

Shidou gradually said so, ever so slowly. The answer to a question that was excessively easy to discourse. When declared, however, there was always a feeling of releasing all the pent up gloom accumulated in the bottom of your heart up till then. *Shidou* grinned, most likely having perceived Shidou's decision.

"Do your best, high school student."

"You as well, high school student."

Shidou and *Shidou* said good-bye by bumping their fists, and Shidou conveniently plunged into the rift created in that space.

"....Uu."

◇◇◇

◇◇◇

——The intimate sensation of his shoulders being gently shook back and forth gradually restored Shidou’s latent consciousness. Shidou softly snorted and widened his unfocused eyes, catching the vague sight of his adoptive sister as she was holding her stretched palm right in front of his silly face.

“What are you doing, Kotori?”

“God, you finally woke up. One second later and I would've hit you for the twentieth time.”

“...Eh? You've hit me 19 times already?! That many?!”

Shidou yelled angrily as he reluctantly placed his hands on his face, trying to feel the feverish heat radiating from the scalding redness.

“Just kidding.”

Kotori replied with a sarcastic shrug.

As Shidou touched his face sensitively in order to reconfirm that the pain was definitely absent, he concurrently did a quick inspection of his surroundings and present circumstances. He wasn't located in the decrepit straw hut wherein he had previously awakened to his near-doom, rather he found himself barely lying in one of the many corporeal corridors of Ratatoskr’s secret base, whose hardened cement walls and steel-reinforced concrete ceilings had all collapsed without exception into sizable heaps of scattered rubble.

The other Spirits were clustered together in one place and Tohka had placed her hands on Shidou’s shoulders, gently shaking him. Everyone wasn't wearing patchy rough cotton outfits or resplendent ceremonial dresses anymore. Their attires had already reverted to their original, ordinary clothes.

“Really… didn't I say that we're running out of time? Stop dawdling around.”

Kotori stiffly crisscrossed her arms on her chest and exhaled perfunctorily.

“Oh… Sorry about that. But—”

Shidou clumsily stood up with all the strength carried in his legs and lightly clapped his face a few times in order to clear his muddled head.

“—everything's fine now.”

“....? I see, well, it's good to see that you're energized.”

Kotori tilted her head to one side with a tinge of suspicion, but immediately judged that it was not the time to sit idly, and conclusively motioned her chin to urge everyone.

“Anyway, we must make haste. Although the time we spent is shorter than we think, a surprise attack may befall Fraxinus at any moment.”

“Un!”

“Understood.”

The Spirits shouted in agreement and followed Kotori compliantly, running through the run-down corridor with resolution. Shidou wasn't far behind too, forging ahead through the bedraggled, dilapidated base as loud, reverberant explosions and ear-piercing gunshots echoed still. After randomly encountering and subsequently decimating a couple of <Bandersnatch> units, Shidou and the others reached the entrance of Fraxinus’ dedicated hangar at last.

Perhaps the external surveillance camera had adequately recognized their respective identities or detected the dire situation beforehand, but Shidou and the others were allowed entry into the expansive hangar as Kannazuki’s voice was heard from the loudspeaker.

“——! Commander! You're safe!”

“Un, sorry to keep you guys waiting.”

Kotori lightly raised her hand in response and continuously walked towards the airship’s lower deck. Shidou and the other Spirits tailed behind her, and were instantly transported to the ship's bridge.

“—What's the situation?”

Once she entered the bridge, Kotori quickly advanced forward while swiftly undoing the button on her military-uniform jacket, hanging it loosely around her shoulders. She abruptly extended her bare right hand to one side, to which Kannazuki, who was obediently awaiting orders, respectfully saluted and handed over one of the many identical lollipops neatly arranged on the shelf.

Kotori gratefully accepted it, tearing the candy wrapper with voraciousness and putting the ambrosial treat into her mouth whilst simultaneously sitting down on the captain's seat. Shidou couldn't help but ruefully marvel at his sister's smooth, almost graceful, sequence of movements.

“Roger. At the moment, one Arbatel-type aerial warship is hovering above the base. Approximately 120 wizards have infiltrated the base. 21 confirmed casualties have been reported, including technical personnel, and 185 people have taken refuge.”

“...I see.”

As Kotori whispered mournfully, the characters MARIA was then observably displayed on the main monitor.

『There is no time to become crestfallen, Kotori. You must carry out your duties now.』

“Un, I'm aware of that.”

Kotori calmly exhaled in order to abandon her lingering attachments and made a firm resolution, lifting her head.

“—We will finish what we set out to do. Prepare Fraxinus EX for takeoff. I trust that the maintenance has been completed?”

“Roger!”

The crew members all yelled out in unison.

“However, it seems that the power in the hangar has been disrupted by the enemy. We're unable to operate the gate.”

“Hm, I guess we don't have a choice. —Break through.”

“Link the basis Realizer unit with the propeller and deploy Territory. Initialize camouflage and automatic evasion.”

“As you command, launching the basis Realizer unit and engine juxtaposition.”

“Deploying Territory. ——We're ready to depart.”

The trifling beeps and electronic tones of starting machinery coming from somewhere within the ship were accompanied by the crew's voices of exaltation. As they gradually grew more sonorous, Kotori softly nodded her head and shot a glance at Shidou and the others who were conveniently standing behind her.

“Get ready, brace yourselves.”

“Oh, alright.”

Shidou nodded his head and firmly gripped onto a pillar positioned beside the wall. The Spirits imitated his example accordingly, except for Origami and Nia who were holding onto his arms. The two were ultimately pulled apart by Tohka and the others though requiring utmost force to remove every reluctant finger clinging onto the poor boy's arms. Kotori sighed grudgingly and turned back her head to the front, giving orders in a commanding tone.

“Fraxinus EX, go!”

Afterwards, the whole vessel vigorously shook as if heeding her command. The primary monitor showed the hangar’s inner walls being crushed flat by an overwhelming, invisible force, unyieldingly squashing it into mere scrap material.

A rather tingling, floating sensation enveloped the entire bridge, and the image displayed on the large screen transformed into the blue sky the next instant.

“Uohh…”

Shidou exclaimed softly whilst exerting force into his legs in order to stabilize his body.

An airship which utilizes a Realizer unit does not need to acquire aviation lift like that of an ordinary airplane in order to fly. On the contrary, the Territory which covers the whole ship allows the enormous vessel to float unconstrainedly. For this reason, it can fly in a way which defies the conventional laws of physics.

At that moment, a huge silhouette was confirmed to be flying in the sky and was shown on the monitor, resulting in an alarm being set off in the bridge.

『The enemy warship hovering above the base has been confirmed. What should we do? 』

Maria’s voice was emitted from the loudspeaker. Kotori furrowed her eyebrows and uprighted the stick of her lollipop.

“We must proceed to space as soon as possible.”

『Affirmative.』

“Even though we'll be subjected to graver harm, we mustn't slow down.”

『Affirmative.』

“You know the rest, Maria.”

『Affirmative.』

As Maria insipidly replied, Kotori held her lollipop between her fingers and pointed at front.

“Sort it out within one minute.”

『That's the Kotori I know. 』

With Maria saying that rather happily, Kotori then issued directives to the crew.

“Discharge<Yggdrafolium> numbers one to three. Set the Territory to obstruct any intruders and change its attribute to explosive afterwards.”

“Roger, <Yggdrafolium> units one to three on standby for launch.”

The auxiliary monitors displayed an outline of Fraxinus, showing its rear section which resembled a giant tree glowing brightly. The next instant, some ‘unknown entities’, which appeared on the screen flew towards the endless sky.

The reason why they were described as unknown entities is simple, as those unknown entities were covered with invisibility camouflage. Shidou’s naked eyes were unable to see them. Assuming the transparent <Yggdrafolium> was to come into contact with the enemy ship, its assigned trajectory would slightly distort space.

A few seconds later, they arrived in front of DEM’s warship and those unknown entities simultaneously detonated. Even the enemy did not expect that to happen. The pitiable airship emitted billows of thick smoke and began its descent towards the surface.

“Hmm.”

Kotori pointed her thumb downwards.

“Time elapsed, 52 seconds.”

“Just passable, we must recover that delay. Elevate altitude and rocket through the atmosphere in one go.”

“Roger!”

Just as the crew responded, Fraxinus’ body faintly vibrated and the picture on the main screen switched to the view underneath at an incredible speed. The mesmerizing scene resembled that of one taken by a camera attached to a rising balloon.

Before a few minutes even passed, the scenery shown on the main monitor had already separated itself from the sky. Pitch-black space crammed into the entire frame while countless of shining stars flickered luminously.

It exactly was the same scene that had been taken by the automatic camera previously. Shidou gulped, gazing fixedly at the footage.

At that moment…

The figure of a young girl sunken in tranquil sleep with fluttering golden hair appeared.

“...Mukuro…!”

Shidou tightly clenched his fist as he called out the girl's name. Despite the fact that his voice could not reach the outside of the ship, Mukuro’s eyebrows slightly quivered.

“...Huh?”

Fraxinus had most likely detected sound coming from the outside. Although weak, it was definitely Mukuro’s voice which was transmitted through the loudspeaker.

Under normal circumstances, sound cannot propagate through the vacuum of space. But it was probably due to the Territory-like effect of her Astral Dress that allowed her voice steadily and clearly to vibrate into Shidou’s eardrums.

“Thou ought to have heeded mine admonishments, thou whose origin art unchanged.”

Mukuro stretched her body and raised her right hand, lips quivering slightly.

“——<Michael>.”

With that verse of hers, a key-shaped staff materialized in Mukuro’s right hand from the hollow void. She then stabbed <Michael>’s serrated end into space.

“—— 《Rātaibu -Unlock》.”

Mukuro turned the key, creating a gigantic gate. She lifted her hand, and immediately flung it down as if executing a death sentence. The innumerable pieces of garbage dispersed throughout the nearby space were all attracted towards the gate and sucked inside, similar to how a black hole absorbs everything. The next moment, even more gates appeared around Fraxinus, pouring out barrages of uncountable bullets at the same time.

“U-Uawahh?!”

Shidou couldn't help but curl up when he saw the countless moving rocks of matter travelling towards the ship at considerable velocities. However, Kotori was not in the least flustered and promptly issued instructions.

“Territory, defense specialization!”

“Roger!”

The auxiliary monitor screens gave out a thin light. Meanwhile, the innumerable projectiles instantly disintegrated right before contact with the ship's body.

“T-This is…”

“It's another story if we were directly attacked by an angel, but these small peas have virtually no effect on Fraxinus.”

Kotori explained triumphantly as she turned her captain's chair 180 degrees towards Shidou.

“Alright, Shidou, it's your turn next. Are you ready?”

“—Un, of course.”

Shidou nodded his head with zeal as he exposed his determination. Kotori then widened her eyes as if she didn't expect his calm response.

“Although I don't know what you and the *Shidou* in the other world had chatted about, that ethos of yours isn't half-bad. Very well, let our date <war> begin.”

As she said so, Kotori used her chin to signal the crew members operating their automation consoles. Around the outline of Fraxinus displayed on the monitor, a circular field enlarged.

“We will be expanding Fraxinus’ Territory up to Mukuro’s coordinates so Shidou, you won't need to worry about problems like air or cosmic radiation. You’ll be able rely on your body to move in space. —After all, wearing a spacesuit during a date is just way too unromantic and insensitive.”

Kotori shrugged her shoulders as if she cracked a joke, and continued her speech.

“You can depend on us for your basic movement control and defense. The Territory should be able to block any attacks like before. Shidou, you have to do everything possible in order to approach Mukuro. Begin strategy.”

“.....”

Shidou looked attentively once more at Mukuro who was subtly floating in the approximate center of the LCD monitor, and lightly nodded his head whilst exhaling a breath.

—At that time.

“...A-About that.”

Natsumi, who was shyly hiding herself behind Yoshino's also petite frame, unexpectedly spoke out.

“What's wrong, Natsumi?” asked Kotori, taken aback by the sudden voice.

“...No, it's nothing, it's a g-good, but Mukuro-san looks… f-frightening… shouldn't we go together? It'll be… what you think?”

Natsumi muttered hesitatingly while shifting her gaze solitarily to one side.

As if somehow triggered by her rapturous panache, the other Spirits visibly verbalized their supportive opinions as well.

“I-If I'm able to help… I-I’ll gladly assist in guarding Shidou-san with <Zadkiel>… if the Territory can't hold Mukuro-san…”

“Ah, good idea~. My <Gabriel>’s songs may come in handy too.”

“Ooh! I'll go too!”

The Spirits variously requested Kotori with pleading puppy eyes, to which she let out a discomfited expression for a considerable period of time. Finally, Kotori had no other choice but to renounce her blatant misgivings and heaved a heavy sigh of surrender.

“You guys really… But only go when Shidou’s life is in danger, this date was supposed to be for persuading Mukuro in the first place. A crowd of people approaching her without rhyme or reason would definitely alert her and make it difficult for us.”

“Ooh!”

The Spirits forcefully nodded their heads towards Kotori’s strict regulations. Shidou couldn't help but grin wryly at the sight of their rallied unity.

“Thanks everyone. I'll do my best so that you guys won't need to act.”

Shidou steadfastly treaded towards and occupied the teleporter unit, which had previously transported him to the bridge.

“Well then, I'm in your hands, Kotori.”

“Un, begin transportation immedia—”

However, just as Kotori issued the final command, a red light illuminated within the bridge and a sharp, oscillating warning siren resounded throughout.

“What's going on?!”

“...! It's… an enemy! Above the Earth are three… no, four of DEM’s space warships!!”

As Minowa shouted the urgent emergency situation, the digital footage of many gigantesque warships appeared on the monitor. The drastic change of events caused Kotori’s face to flip in furious rage.

“Talk about bad timing… Although this was anticipated, I didn't think it would actually happen. Well, they’ll turn out like that small fry before, no matter how many…—”

Halfway through her ireful words, Kotori’s eyebrows marginally twitched. Her eyes were fixedly focused on the four great warships displayed on the screen, glued especially to the smallest ship of the quartet. But ‘small’ merely described its relative size. Her expression became severe, permeating with slight excitation. The ship's characteristic streamlined body was of a platinum finish, and its exterior appearance was obviously heterogeneous to the other three crude warships. Since they had all came there, the space warships were without a doubt carrying combat objectives. But the polished ship which exquisitely stood out from the four looked as if it was a special-purpose vessel specially made for a special high-ranking official.

Kotori rolled the stick of her lollipop and blurted the ship's name out.

“Goetia…!”

“Wha…!” Shidou widened his eyes in shock.

<Goetia>. Although it was the first time that he had directly seen the ship with his own eyes, the portentous name had been spoken from Kotori’s mouth numerous times. That was Ellen Mira Mathers’ personal warship, equipped with the strongest engine power in the world. Also, in the ‘past world’, the ship had ruthlessly shot down Fraxinus. Beads of sweat exuded from Kotori’s face as she licked her dry lips.

“...Rather grudgeful eh, holding a rematch on the first day the newly built Fraxinus sets sail.”

“Is there a problem…?”

Shidou asked while pursuing his brows a bit. Maria then replied through the loudspeaker.

『Don't worry. I'm different from the previous version. I will let the enemy know - the name of the world's number one airship.』

“Well said, Maria.”

Kotori drew back the corners of her mouth into a grin and instinctively ordered the crew members.

“Deploy the double Territory! Expand the first layer to coordinates (6,2,2), set its attribute to space control, and set the second layer as defensive! Prepare for battle!”

“Roger!”

The crew members simultaneously responded to her improvisational instructions and quickly began operating their respective automation consoles. After Kotori observed the progress their work, she turned her head towards Shidou and gave him generous thumbs up.

“Mukuro’s all yours, Shidou. Good luck in your fight, no, in this case it's… —Good luck with your love endeavors.”

“Haha, what's that supposed to mean.”

Hearing his sister's strange but somewhat fitting blessing, Shidou couldn't help but burst into laughter.

“You too, Kotori.”

“Un.”

Following Kotori’s brief reply, Shidou’s body was delivered outside the ship without delay. His vision instantly changed from the ship's bridge to the infinite cosmos beyond. A levitating sensation shrouded his entire body.

“Ooh…?!”

Shidou shouted as his body was abruptly released from the constraining shackles of gravity, nearly rotating in place.

Nevertheless, precisely as Kotori had explained, there was an inconceivable feeling of profound stability as if an invisible hand was supporting him from behind. That was undoubtedly the Territory maintaining Shidou’s body posture. Naturally, owing to the fact that he had absolutely no experience of swimming in space, that peculiar tingliness

could not be erased. But he could breathe normally and the temperature felt by his skin was appropriate. These regulated conditions were sufficiently enough to provide Shidou a suitable environment in order to converse with Mukuro casually.

“—Okay.”

Shidou nodded his head gently, powerfully contracting his legs and pedaling through space. In accordance with the thrust accumulated from his motions, Shidou's body was propelled in Mukuro's direction as a result.

“——Huh?”

It was then that she finally noticed the annoying existence which was slowly nearing her. Mukuro threw her vision aside and caught sight of the approaching Shidou, solemnly narrowing her eyes in response.

“Thou, I recall… art named Shidou, regrettably with non-reminiscence. Did Muku not bid thee an age long adieu added brimming abhorrence?”

Hearing Mukuro’s authentic voice for the first time without the means of any electronic devices, a tiny hint of tense nervousness mingled with thrilled exhilaration and a determined sense of duty evolved within Shidou's courageous heart as he attentively faced Mukuro.

“I'm honored that you remember my name. Could it be that you wanted to see me so badly?”

“...Huh?”

Mukuro inclined her head, but that did not imply that she didn't understand Shidou's persuasive words. Saying such words so boldly made her suspect that Shidou had accidentally bumped his head somewhere and became mentally impeded. However, Shidou didn't mind that at all and leisurely continued.

“Get ready, you spoiled child. You should know that my ego has no end.”

Within the invariably dark world which separated heaven and earth, the heavy curtains unfolded to unveil a clandestine [date] between man and spirit.

To be continued.

Afterword

Long time no see, I'm Tachibana Koushi.

This time, I present to you 「Date A Live Volume 14 Mukuro Planet」, what do you think? I'd be extremely honoured if you liked it.

As mentioned, 六喰 is read as むくろ (ｍｕ-ｋｕ-ｒｏ). Succeeding Kurumi's indecipherable name (時崎狂三) and Natsumi's fallaciously mistakable name (七罪) there is another infuriating name. Why is she named that? It's because much more elegant that way. When I gave this name to my editor, Editor-san excitedly said that 喰 is way cooler compared to 食.

Moving on, this volume is mainly comprised of the space chapters and the fairy tale chapters. From the storyline's perspective, it's analogous to merging the latter half of Nia's volume with the former half of Mukuro's volume.

Anyway, the fairy tale versions of the Spirits are so lovely! It really makes me want to let the other characters experience that fantasy world. Allow me to imagine:

《Sleeping Beauty Reine》 (In truth she can't sleep because of insomnia.) [1]

《Kaguya-hime Tama-chan》 (Can't get married because her standards are too high.) [2]

《The Wolf and the Seven Little Kurumis》 (I can only see the wolf being bullied instead.) [3]

《Ali Baba and the 40 Kurumis》 (Not even a slice of flesh would be left of the poor guy.) [4]

《101 Kurumis》 (Only despair.) [5]

It's rather complicated even though they're quite fascinating. I wonder if I can write them into an encore chapter or a short story. It was under the pooled efforts of many people that this volume could be published successfully.

I'd like to thank my illustrator Tsunako-sensei for having drawn such flawless novel illustrations beyond any of my expectations. Mukuro's character is so cute too!

I'm very grateful to Arranger-san, Designer-san, everybody in the editorial department and selling my book in their bookstores, along with those of you holding my book in your hands right now.

Well then, next is Volume 15. Will Shidou be able to unlock Mukuro’s sealed heart? See you next time.

February 2016, Tachibana Koushi.

Translation and References

Chapter 1:

1. A saisen-box (賽銭箱) is a small wooden container used to hold money offered to the gods or bodhisattvas. It is a common item at Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples in Japan. goback
2. Japanese coins include denominations of ¥ 1, 5, 10, 50, 100 and 500. ¥5 or ご円 is read as “go-en” whereas fate/destiny or ご縁 is also read as “go-en”. These words are known as homophones. With six(六) being read as “roku”, offering six ¥5 coins is hence read as “roku na goen ga nai”, which is homophonous to an unsatisfying fate/destiny. goback
3. “Ema” consists of two Kanji: 絵馬; the one for “picture” and the one for “horse”. Horses were seen as the “vehicles of gods” (神の乗り物) and during the Nara period (奈良時代) people donated horses to the shrines so that the gods would be more likely to listen to their prayers and fulfill wishes. However, horses were expensive and thus people who couldn’t afford it used horse figures made of wood, clay or paper instead. Finally, the wooden wishing plaques with a picture of a horse on them were born. goback
4. A mangaka (漫画家) is a pro who draws manga. goback
5. ‘Natsumi’ and ‘nut’ are pronounced similarly. goback
6. Tsukkomi is the straight man in a Japanese comedy gag. goback

Chapter 2

1. In Japan, school years are divided into three terms, April to July (first), September to December (second), and January to February (third). goback

Chapter 4

1. Momotarō is a popular hero of Japanese folklore originating from Okayama Prefecture. His name translates as Peach Tarō, a common Japanese boy's name, and is often translated as Peach Boy. Momotarō is the title of various books, films and other works that portray the tale of this hero. goback
2. Monogatari refers to an epic narrative, generally one of Japanese literary form. goback
3. The Little Match Girl is a short story by Danish poet and author Hans Christian Andersen. The story is about a dying child's dreams and hope. goback
4. Schwarzwald is German for black forest, the main setting where Hansel and Gretel takes place. goback

Chapter 5

1. In Japan, the Little Mermaid is also known as Ningyo Hime (人魚姫), which translates to English as Mermaid Princess. goback
2. Issun-bōshi ("One-Inch Boy"; sometimes translated into English as "Little One Inch" or "The Inch-High Samurai") is the subject of a fairy tale from Japan. This story can be found in old Japanese illustrated book, Otogizōshi. In the story, the Uchide no kozuchi is a magic hammer that can grant wishes. The story is similar to the tradition of Tom Thumb in English folklore. goback

Afterword

1. Sleeping Beauty, a classic fairy tale written by Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm, which involves a beautiful princess, a sleeping enchantment, and a handsome prince. goback
2. The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter (竹取物語), arguably the oldest Japanese folklore story. Also known as The Tale of Princess Kaguya (かぐや姫の物語). It primarily details the life of a mysterious girl called Kaguya-hime, who was discovered as a baby inside the stalk of a glowing bamboo plant. goback
3. Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, one of the most famous stories told in Arabian Nights. goback
4. The Wolf and the Seven Young Goats. An old Brother Grim fairy tale that is a combination of *The Three Little Pigs* and *Little Red Ridding Hood*. goback
5. 101 Dalmatians, a 1956 children's novel by Dodie Smith about the robbery of the titular family of 101 Dalmatian dogs. goback

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